

CoinLands



poems by c j holcombe

ocaso press 2019

Coinlands

A Book of Numismatic Poems

Colin John Holcombe

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Last Revised: February 2024

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Contents

Poems

Coin Collecting: Introduction	1
1. Archaemenid Empire: Persian Daric	2
2. Greek City States: Elis Stater	4
3. Mauryan Empire: Karshapana	6
4. China of Warring States: Spade coin	8
5. Indo-Greek Kingdoms: Demetrios Stater	10
6. Early Roman Empire: Augustus Denarius	12
7. Indo Scythians: Azes II Tetradrachm	14
8. First Jewish Revolt: Prutah	16
9. Roman Empire: Probus Antoninianus	18
10. Later Roman Empire: Crispus Follis	20
11. Gupta Empire: Chandragupta II Dinar	22
12. Byzantine Empire: Leo VI Solidus	24
13. Visigoths: Sisebut Tremissis	26
14. Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Anonymous Sceat	28
15. Sasanian-Umayyads: Anonymous Drachm	30
16. Holy Roman Empire: Charlemagne Denier	32
17. Fatimids: al Mansur Isma'il Dinar	34
18. Counts of Anjou: Fulk V Denier	36
19. Crusader Kingdoms: Hugh IV Gros Petit	38
20. Trebizond Kingdom: Alexius III Asper	40
21. China: Northern Sung Dynasty: Hui Zong Cash	42
22. Plantaganet England: Edward III Noble	44
23. Timurids: Timur Dirhem	46

24. Plantaganet England: Henry VI Groat	48
25. Spain: Ferdinand & Isabella: Eight Royals	50
26. Renaissance Italy: Milan: Ludovico Storza: Testone	52
27. Tudor England: Henry VII Sovereign	54
28. Habsburg Bohemia: Joachimstaler	56
29. Ottomans: Suleiman Dinar	58
30. France: Wars of Religion: Henry IV. Demi-Franc	60
31. Mughals: Akbar Mohur	62
32. Bohemia: Thirty Years' War: Ferdinand II Dukal	64
33. Stuart England: Charles I: Threepenny Piece	66
34. Imperial Russia: Peter I: Ruble	68
35. Georgian England. George II Guinea	70
36. Papal States: Pius VI 2.5 Baiocchi	72
37. Afghanistan: Durranis: Shah Zaman Rupee	74
38. Revolutionary France: Napoleon I Five Francs	76
39. Industrial England: Penny Token	78
40. Frankfurt Free State: Two Thalers	80
41. Hanoverian England: Victoria Penny	82
42. China: Taiping Rebellion: Cash	84
43. United States of America: Dollar	86
44. Korea: Gojong Ten Warn	88
45. Late Imperial Russia: Nicholas II Twenty Kopeks	90
46. USSR: Ruble	92
47. Nazi Germany: Pfennig	94
48. Botswana: Twenty-Five Thebe	96
Envoi	98

Appendix

Note on the Poems	99
Numismatic References	100

Preface: Coin Collecting

There was the morbid sadness of the streets at night,
existences as thinly meshed as pocket-knives:
from such austerities of England's post-war blight,
we looked to happiness in larger peoples' lives.

For us it was a ringing of pocket money into fragrant lands
of books and cloth-bound catalogues, with tousled friends,
now ghosts on long-scuffed pavements, where each journey stands
upon departures into manhood's lettered ends.

But what perplexities were in their ornate flans,
in rulers' names and dynasties unknown to us —
what heat-afflicted travels made collection plans
in lives so fleeting otherwise, and silent thus.

Between the head and rim was not an empty space
but radiant benediction from a distant place.

1. First Coins: Achaemenid Empire

Though the Achaemenid Empire is often seen through Greek eyes as an Asian tyranny bent on extinguishing European ideals of independence and democracy, Persia was in fact a triumph of statecraft, one that created the largest empire the ancient world had seen, and brought together lands extending from Egypt to northern India under one government. Its inception dates from 550 BC, when Cyrus I of Persia (r. 559-530 B.C.) defeated King Astyages of Media and annexed Iran and eastern Anatolia.



Achaemenid Empire: Darius II - Artaxerxes II (423 - 359 BC) Au Daric, c. 400 BC. Obverse: King in kneeling-running stance, holding spear and bow. Reverse: punch mark. (Maximum diameter 17 mm)

Traditionally, Persian society had three classes — a warrior aristocracy, a priesthood, and a labouring class of farmers and herdsmen, and to this structure was added a patriarchal tribal lineage, and no doubt the social distinctions of the peoples conquered. The priesthood studied the heavens for astrological prediction. Many crafts were practised, and the Achaemenids learnt to separate gold and silver from electrum-bearing alluvial deposits.

The coins struck by the Achaemenid Empire are rather crude affairs: flattish lumps of high-quality gold (daric) or silver (siglos) just bearing the king's insignia on one side and a punchmark on the other. Coins proper are a Greek invention, however, and the concept returned from its westward dissemination in the coinage of the Persian satraps on the edges of the Achaemenid Empire, notably in Anatolia.

Persian Empire: Daric

Enslaving in the end but in this fashion new,
emoluments still winnowed from the alluvial showers
of thin entitlements, with even punch-mark due
to Archaemenid kings and their ebullient powers.

And that electrum wealth was not the measured haze
kicked up by tumultuous horsemen as they came
from ringing corners of the world, but the very days
enumerated in this bluntly stamped-out daric's claim.

A kingdom could be drowned in blood, but here, like earth
itself, its heritage went on. A good bow's use
had brought inheritance, and that intrinsic worth
beyond what war and rain in season might produce.

Precipitant with errors are kingdoms, but here the flights
of arrows were sovereignties through the star-filled nights.

2. Olympia

Socially and individually, the Greeks were a fiercely individual people, and each city-state (polis) controlled its surrounding territory. That polis typically contained an urban area, often fortified, and a sacred centre built on a natural acropolis or harbour. Each polis was in contact with others through trade, treaties and wars, but was otherwise, in its political, judicial, legal, religious and social institutions and practices, an independent entity.



Ar stater Elis (Olympia). Obv: Head of Zeus. Rev: Standing eagle with thunderbolt. F A in field. (15 mm)

The origins of Greek coinage, the extent of its symbolic and economic uses, and whether indeed it was a commodity or fiat coinage are contentious issues. Scholars vehemently disagree — as is the case in many classical coinage issues. Economists, while accepting the symbolic origins of coinage, stress its utility, and argue that small pieces of weighed silver, and then small denominations themselves, preceded the use of the larger denominations collectors are familiar with. Many in the wealthy elite of Athens did prefer to invest in silver mining, however, rather than the more aristocratic practice of land-holding, and Athens seems to have been earlier than most city states in lending out temple treasuries to meet the heavy costs of ship building and local wars.

Elis: Stater

Bespeaking a certain, incised, metallic possessiveness,
accrediting the fields, the workshops, busy quays,
each beneficent but counted into less
than gods who saw them safe across the bustling seas.

Yet what was evidenced were muscled body skills
applied to voyaging and trade as much as husbandry
of wheat and olive on the porous limestone hills —
within their shadowed walls, of course, and sanctuary.

The last immutable, that men could never sour,
given that earth and underneath belonged to Zeus,
dangerous when himself, with his unlicensed power:
if not there mediated by a constant use.

The ships brought fistfuls, heavy, of a solid worth
but nonetheless affordable to the well-tilthed earth.

3. Mauryan Empire

In what may be an independent development, unrelated to events in Lydia or China, the first Indian coins appear with the 6th century BC Mahajanapadas of the Indo-Gangetic plain: punch-marked pieces of irregular shape but constant weight. There were sixteen kingdoms and oligarchic republics, and some issues can be identified by their symbols. Saurashtra used a humped bull, Dakshin Panchala a Swastika, while others, like Magadha, used several symbols.



Mauryan Empire: Ar Karshapana (14 mm)

The 322-185 BC Mauryan Empire extended the issues. Each coin (karshapana) weighed 32 rattis and contained 50-54 grains of silver. Some 450 different punch-marks are known, the most common being the sun and six-armed symbols, various geometrical patterns, circles, wheels, human figures, animals, bows and arrows, hills and trees etc. A few coins are inscribed with Brahmi legends in Prakrit.

The Mauryan Empire reached its greatest extent under Ashoka (r. BC 272–232), who turned away from violence after the defeat of Kalinga forces with its hundreds of thousands of casualties. He embraced the teachings of Buddhism, sent out missionaries to travel and spread the religion to other Asian countries.

Mauryan Empire: Karshapana

Like rain-drops in some indurated sandstone block
that evidence a weather that is otherwise unknown,
each hard-pressed karshapana spoke of taking stock
of gods obliterated into temple stone.

The scriptures noted regulation, tolls on roads,
the fret of craft on rivers, free lodgings for the poor:
nonetheless an industry of heavy loads
beneath the wheel of tedium in their wanting more.

Yet extravagance of spectacle was never part
of rituals here alluded to, nor was it close
to the repetitive blood-thump of the thick-tubed heart:
rebarbative the flesh, intoxicating, damp and morose.

All in the end were illusions, where each loincloth day
was part ephemeral but earned its solid pay.

4. China: Period of Warring States

Coins proper begin in Lydia in the seventh century BC, and in China shortly afterwards. In both areas, however, and probably more generally, true coins were preceded by token coinages: metal rings and axes in Europe and a great variety of objects in China: tortoise shells, cowry shells, gold foil, spade pieces and knives. Spade pieces come in various shapes and sizes, tentatively ascribed by find locations to the many changing kingdoms that were to consolidate into the first Qin Empire (221-206 BC).



China of the Warring States: Ae Spade Coin (28 x 45 mm)

True spade pieces probably appeared in the Eastern Zhou period (770-476 BC) and were followed by knife pieces, and then by round coins that served as prototypes for cash coins issued practically unchanged in China and adjacent countries for two thousand years.

The chivalry common to earlier epochs of Chinese history was replaced in the Period of the Warring States by extreme brutality, whole towns and villages being massacred by opposing armies.

China of the Warring States: Spade Coin

Worse in villages, but now, in their thin-walled towns
awaiting the hooves of conquest, a rallying call
rises on the evening as each prospect drowns
in silk- and blood-dressed warriors, wading tall.

Earth that was niggardly is gluttoned: the small spade coins
observe no splendid obituaries and are not read.
Here life is arbitrary, fragmented and nothing joins
the living to their forebears but the short-stemmed dead.

All in time dwindle to an interrupted line,
residues of corruptible dynasties that are almost lost
into the seal-script of inscriptions that define
themselves less as ghosts of empires as by endless cost.

Ignorance and absence in these slender blades:
blusters of arrows in intermittent fusillades.

5. Indo Greeks

The Indo-Greeks ruled small kingdoms in what is now Afghanistan and northwest India, a legacy of Alexander's Hellenising conquests. The last two centuries BC saw more than thirty kings, at peace or war with each other.

Demetrios was one of the early rulers and his masterpiece of numismatic art represents a peculiarly Greek view of man's place in the world. Under the Indo-Greeks, the city states became small kingdoms, partly adopting the Buddhist faith, and thereby cut off from Mediterranean events, indeed being surrounded by hostile powers: the restive steppe peoples to the north and native Indian kingdoms to the south. That vulnerability we can sense in this coin with its empty spaces on the flan, the legend not integrated with the figure, and with Heracles crowning himself. Greek art is an idealisation, moreover, where the human body, usually displayed in its unclothed form, is the foundation of all beauty and proportion.



Bactria: Demetrios I (200-185 BC) Ar Tetradrachm. Obv. Diademed, draped bust right wearing elephant-skin headdress Rev: Herakles standing facing, holding club and lion skin in left hand, and crowning himself with his right hand ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΔΗΜΗΤΡΙΟΥ monogram in lower left field. (33 mm)

Balance and mathematical order underlie these conceptions, and art is created for the joy of the spirit, or the simple animal happiness of being alive. That isolation or defiance of local events — Heracles has succeed against all odds — is everywhere present in this idealisation: it is beautiful, but unreal.

Demetrios: Stater

Reigning ever beautiful in this rich land
of terraces and river-watered slopes of simmering heat,
between the nomadic peoples moving that more close to hand
and the murmuring southward fields of fabled, thick-sown wheat:

Demetrios: the headdress of an elephant
proclaims him forever triumphant, though the reverse flan
set out the legends sideways, as though words were scant
acknowledgement that here was one, solitary man.

Who passed as others pass across this continent
of hot impermanence, of sects and strange belief.
Perplexing the fabled blaze as empires came and went,
yet always incantatory, intense and brief.

Here too the Zeus-anointed came in wind-snatched song:
an Alexander, the god-like, who did not live long.

6. Early Roman Empire: Augustus

Octavian (later called Augustus) restored the outward façade of a free Republic, with government ostensibly vested in the Senate, the executive magistrates and legislative assemblies. Behind the scenes, however, he firmly retained the powers invested in him by the Senate — supreme military commander, tribune and censor — and ensured that legions were stationed so widely around the Empire that mutinies would not easily coalesce into another claimant for the throne. He secured peace with the Parthian Empire, enlarged Rome's borders by annexing Egypt, Dalmatia, Pannonia, Noricum and Raetia, and protected those borders further with tributary buffer states. He fostered the arts, and embarked on large-scale rebuilding of Rome, finding it, as he said, of brick, and leaving it in marble.



Roman Empire: Augustus (27 BC-AD 14). Ar denarius. Struck 19-18 BC at Spanish mint of Emerita. Obverse: CAESAR AVGVSTVS, Bare head right. Reverse: Oak wreath with ties up in centre. OB CIVIS SERVATOS, (For rescuing all his fellows: i.e. benefactor) (19 mm)

Image was what counted, and Augustus' long reign and intrinsic power ensured the image was suitably maintained. C(aius) CAESAR IMP(erator) often appeared on obverse legends. Imperator alludes his official appointment as joint commander against Antony in January 43 BC, though Augustus was an indifferent general at best. His relations with the legislature were as tangled and dubious as Caesar's had been, and the coins commonly record membership of two priestly corporations (Pontifex and Augur) at ages too young for him to be properly eligible.

Augustus: Denarius

The hard, plain daylight ghosted on the silver flan,
or laurel that embellishes a modest head,
were here but inclinations of a cautious man,
a good republican at heart had not the hard times led.

A man dissembling to the end, but with the power
to hold the mutinous provinces to Rome's command.
He had no bodyguards. Why should he, with every hour
in waiting, subject to the Senate's just demand?

The past was safely past, abundant blood now dry
on great proscriptions, sequestered lands, the vilified:
charred bones were locked in sepulchres: the clear blue sky
indemnified a country that had also died.

Cool and abundantly abstemious, the image looks
long towards scholars and the coming history books.

7. The Indo-Scythians (80 BC - AD 20)

The Saka were nomadic peoples who had been driven from their homelands around 130 BC by the arrival of the Zuezhi, an Indo-European people that had themselves been displaced from the Gansu corridor by Mongol peoples some time around 170 BC. The Saka were called Scythians by the Greeks, and seem to have been Iranian-speaking Indo-European nomads who deployed chariots in battle, sacrificed horses, and buried their dead in barrows or mound tombs called kurgans. The migrations came in overlapping waves, probably more complexly than is recorded by their coinage, in which there is much borrowing and amalgamation of styles. Each group emerges into history as they strike coins whose similarities may nonetheless conceal differences in languages and social customs.

The Sakas advanced into the Indo-Greek kingdoms of Bactria around 80 BC, though pockets of these Indo-Greek peoples persisted, and for decades continued to issue coins.



Indo-Scythians: Azes II (35-5 AD) Ar tetradrachm. Obv: King on horseback with whip. Rev: Athena standing with shield and spear. (24 mm)

These tribal migrations had a profound effect on surrounding countries. 'Barbarian' hordes hastened the end of the western Roman Empire, and, in settling, became the forebears of modern Europe and so America.

Azes II: Tetradrachm

An ungainly exuberance at best. The bannered lance
and blundered khorosti promote the imperial cause.
Across the pinched-in centuries, each small advance
was through the horse-back interludes of polis laws.

Crucially, logically, as from a water wheel
where fields dust-brown in winter flood to green again,
at the unnumbering incursions they could only kneel:
abnegation and patience are the lot of men.

Besides, these were different. Each tousled and cord-bound head
was loud in the saddle, and the bridle silver spoke
of summer snow-melts on the inland heights, the mutinous spread
of glittering distances that made the Scythian yoke.

In this metal they ruled, embattled, a half-mythic breed
led by a basileus in Greek they couldn't read.

8. Jewish Kingdom 67-69 A.D.

War eventually depopulated the Jewish homeland, turning a major population of the eastern Mediterranean into scattered and persecuted minorities. There were several Jewish-Roman wars: the First revolt (AD 66–73), the Kitos War (AD 115–117), and the Bar Kokhba revolt (AD 132–136). Some autonomy was achieved in Galilee until the 4th century, and later in Jerusalem (AD 614–617), but Jewish control of the southern Levant was regained only with the founding of the modern state of Israel in 1948.

The images on this coin are of a Jewish amphora (large pottery vessel used for storing water or wine) and a grape leaf, both symbols of prosperity and abundance. Although there were many different factions in Israel, revolt first broke out against Rome in 66 A.D., and, after a long war, ended with the capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple by Titus in 70 A.D. Masada was the last stronghold of the Jewish rebellion, and it was destroyed three years later by Flavius Silva in 73 A.D.



First Jewish Revolt. Ae Prutah. Obverse: narrow-necked amphora with the inscription "Year Two". Reverse: vine and tendril with the inscription 'the freedom of Zion'. (16 mm)

Before their defeat, and the Jewish diaspora, the rebel leaders minted coins for their nascent government and economy, and these coins bore the aspirational symbols of restoration they hoped for.

First Jewish Revolt: Prutah

As indicated by the fat amphora, the refulgent vine,
perpetually God would pour out what their faith had won:
a land given to His good people, who could divine
but base idolatry in talk of God's own son.

So came the Temple siege, the massacres, Masada's fall,
the heresies, the Zealot's and the fractious civil wars,
the thousands crucified on the outward city wall:
the first great holocaust to gain a rational cause.

And then, unalterably, what centuries would not rescind:
a land stripped bare, enslavements, spring's decease.
Unheard, through the unroofed towns, the repetitious wind
rose up in brute and blankly-minted obsequies

for a people that looked back, always, burdened by heavy loads
of promises, abundant and companionless, on endless roads.

9. Rome: The Military Caesars

Rome was a monetary society, and much of the money went to legions stationed on its borders, especially needed after the Empire had been weakened by barbarian inroads, wars of succession, rampant inflation and a fading ethos of civic duty. Indeed the Roman Empire of the period was very different from the splendid entity founded by Augustus three centuries earlier. Yet, however changed in practice, the concept survived.

The military Caesars of the late 3rd century like Probus dealt effectively with barbarian invasions, civil strife, economic disorder, and plague. Diocletian reformed the treasury, attempted to control prices and replaced the single emperor by a tetrarchy. Constantine introduced the solidus — a coin that was to last a thousand years — founded Constantinople in the east, and made Christianity the official religion of the later Roman Empire.



Roman Empire: Probus, Ar/Ae Antoninianus, A.D. 276. First Emission, Siscia, Officina 1. Obv. IMP C M AVR PROBVS AVG Radiate, draped, cuirassed bust right. Rev. CONCORD MILIT (23 mm)

Probus (ruling 276 to 282), was an active general and conscientious administrator, securing prosperity for the inner provinces while repelling repeated barbarian attacks on almost all sectors of the frontier. Under him and succeeding Caesars, the army was expanded and its pay improved, but the cost was heavy taxes that fell increasingly on the poor — one of many burdens that brought the Empire to an end.

Probus: Antoninianus

Across the fraying, debt-encumbered frontier realms
where all's provisional but stoutly garrisoned,
an immiserating anarchy overwhelms
the woods and steppelands dwindling to the far beyond.

Here men with childhood-corded skulls and rough furs press
from moving continuums of scattered, goat-haired yurts
to brief agrandissements, and then, with time's duress,
the wind returns with moribund and thin alerts.

The empire jolts and totters like a vacant thing
buffeted by conquest, by unstirruped men
habituated to hunger, hardship, where the soft winds bring
like summer flies the radiate brute head again.

Yet what was needed was issued, and each thin-washed piece
held off again the blood and plunder in its short-fused lease.

10. Later Roman Empire: Crispus

Crispus was the eldest son of Constantine by Minervina, who was either a concubine or commoner first wife of the emperor. He was born some time between 295 and 305, and was executed on Constantine's orders in 326, possibly for an affair with Faustus, Constantine's official or second wife — who was herself executed shortly afterwards.



Roman Empire. Crispus (AD 317-326 Ae follis. Struck AD 326 at Rome. Obv: FL IVL CRISPVS NOB CAES, (Crispus Noble Caesar) laureate, draped and cuirassed bust left. Rev: PROVIDEN-TIAE CAESS, (Foresight of the Caesars) camp-gate with no doors and two turrets, star above; R (wreath) T. (21 mm)

Imperial marriages in these troubled times were often made and unmade for dynastic reasons. Constantine's mother had been set aside when her husband sought an alliance with the emperor Maximian, for example, and in 307 Constantine himself allied with the Italian Augusti by marrying Fausta, the daughter of Maximian and sister of Maxentius. Whatever the circumstances, Crispus was brought up properly, tutored by Lactantius, and soon proved himself a capable and loyal son. Together with his younger half-brother Constantine II and first cousin Licinius, he was named Caesar by the two Augusti in March 317. He married a young woman called Helena in 322, who bore him a son in October 322. Wife and son thereafter disappear from historical record, if only because all three suffered 'damnatio memoriae' — their names were deleted from official documents and monuments.

Crispus: Follis

The choirs, the incense and the emissaries. *Non nobis domine*. Outside, the chain-mailed world of raw manoeuvres, battle-fleets, saw rough men gone, following the penants that the blundering winds unfurled.

But here in hot licentiousness of leisured courts the women's eyes withheld such mysteries, such hints of unclothed impudence that these imperial thoughts collide with infidelities and restruck mints.

Faustus, rich in coiffures and forbidden wealth, imperial longings in her thick and cloying breath: *Demnatio memoriae*. Each muted self had something inextricable from their ordered death.

More in odd coins than inscriptions will be Crispus read, or held in glory that laureate and unbending head.

11. Gupta Empire

The Gupta empire was not marked by enormous material wealth or extensive trade, but by its creativity. The visual arts, architecture, literature and scholarship flourished under Samudragupta's successors. Chandragupta II gave great support to artists and craftsmen, actually paying for their work — unusual in ancient civilizations. Nalanda University was founded, Kalidasa wrote his great poetry, and the scientist Aryabhata surmised that the earth was a rotating sphere, calculating the solar year to within 3 hours of its correct value. Narrative histories, religious and meditative thought, and lyric poetry emerged to enrich, educate, and entertain the people. Scholars wrote essays on subjects ranging from grammar and medicine to mathematics and astronomy.



Gupta Empire. Chandragupta II (375-415 AD) Heavy gold dinar. Obv: King in tribhanga position with the bow and arrow and wearing a cholaka (an ancient warrior's uniform modified from a Kushan version) and short, tucked dhoti. Sash whip is tied to waist. Chandra under left arm. Legend (off flan) is Devasrimaharajadhirajasri. Rev: Goddess Lakshmi seated on lotus, holding a lotus in one hand and a diadem in the other. Legend (in Brahmi but off flan) is Shri Vikramah. (20 mm)

The Ajanta Caves in southern India are world famous, but matched by magnificent architecture and sculpture elsewhere. The Gupta rulers practised Hindu rituals and religions — they were Vaishnavas — but there was widespread religious freedom: statues to Buddha and Shiva also appear. The empire weakened under White Hun invasions, and disappeared altogether around AD 550.

Chandragupta II: Dinar

Though voluptuous through indolence, each limb or breast
retains its frank inheritance. The cloth tucks in
what vaguaries there are of body's shape: there comes no rest
from contemplation but this thick and cloying skin.

Such the glistening portentousness the coin inhabits, not
protuberance of larger purpose, more a drop of sweat
exhuded from the god-head: the thick gold has got
none of the bewildering effusions that the days beget.

So, at this being in the world but not of it,
the divine mystery of coitus that the clasped limbs drink:
florid and world-weary, the depicted bodies sit
on the tremulous edge of indulgences that, resistless, sink

like the gods into nothingness, that long haul
into the elusiveness of existence, and its endless fall.

12. Byzantium

During its first three centuries of its existence, the empire followed the systems established by Diocletian and Constantine, where civil and military duties were kept strictly apart, and offices were based on membership or not of the Senate. With the loss of territories to Islam, the senatorial class remained in place, but a new, more court-centered system emerged, supported by a nobility that was either metropolitan based or provincial, the last having large land holdings but no military forces of their own their own.



Byzantine. Leo VI Au Solidus. Constantinople, ca 908-912 AD. +IhS XPS REX REgNANTIUM, (Christ Pantocrator King of Kings) Christ seated facing in lyre-backed throne, raising right hand in benediction & holding Gospel in left, CONOB in exergue. LEOh ET COhSTANT' AUgg' ROM, (Leo and Constantine, Roman Augusti) Leo VI & Constantine IV standing facing, both crowned and wearing loros, each holding cross on globe, patriarchal cross between them. (22 mm)

Protocols were as exact and intricate as those of Imperial China, and court life passed in a sort of ballet, with precise ceremonies prescribed for every occasion — to show that imperial power could be exercised in harmony and order and to reflect the motion of the Universe as it was made by the Creator. Byzantine coinage forms a very regular series: a gold solidus and a copper nummus (generally 40 nummi making the follis), both reformed by Anastasius in AD 498.

Byzantium: Solidus

The evening dawdles on the monuments, and takes
an impenitent long leave of imperial munificence.

Mutatis mutandis is the world, in silence makes
its own ornate and somber music out of thin events.

We have set upon these coins our empire's nimbused face
of jewelled and ornate modesty, that all men here
have thoughtful purpose in this Heaven's still-falling grace
and serve His ministry, therefore: be always near.

The court parades its protocol, and like the sun
the emperor moves on ceaseless idolatries and requires
a prompt and unfailing obedience to what is won
of the pure heart held captive to the unseen choirs.

What is eternal is always eternal, and men may not
forego the instances of gain their age begot.

13. Visigoths

Two Germanic tribes, the Franks and the Alemanni, periodically raided across the Pyrenees as Roman government weakened, but in 410 AD the Suevi and the Vandals were permanently displaced into the Iberian Peninsula by invading Huns, to be followed by the Visigoths, Romanised Europeans who had moved west from the Danube Valley. The Visigoth kingdom included southern Gaul, but in 507 AD the Visigoths lost much of their territory to the Franks. The Romans in Iberia had issued a plentiful coinage in gold, silver and base metal, but this declined in the 5th century to a mere trickle, being replaced by the gold tremissis, weighing a third of the solidus, but accepted as the standard coinage in the 6th and 7th centuries. Tremisses were struck from 79 mints, and are crudely made: a schematic king's bust on both flans, with the king's name on the obverse, and mint name plus Pious (the just) on the reverse. The Visigoth kingdom was overthrown when Roderic was defeated by the Arabs in 711 AD.



Visigothic Kingdom of Spain, Sisebut Au Tremissis. Ispali (Seville), AD 612-621. Obv: +SISEBTVS RE, facing bust. Rev: +ISPALI PIVS, facing bust. (16 mm)

As was general in the decaying western Roman Empire, the population moved from cities to the countryside, becoming rural and semi-feudal as landlords offered employment and protection. In AD 587 the Visigoths converted to Christianity and began building churches and cathedrals, but the country was often lawless, particularly during the many civil wars of the 7th century.

Sisebut: Tremissis

Mostly it was plunder, helmets and blunt murder. Through the rain-drenched furze and saturated, chilly mists, emerged the groups of leather-clad marauders. Few record their unrepented of and deadly trysts.

And what they scattered on the heathland soils, in soft-leafed humus of their elemental past, in stopping points at burnt-out settlement or shaded woodland croft was not of plain humanity, but what appoints

itself as emblematic on this golden flan, a semblance not to be guessed at, another world and one of myth and mirage, far from what Hispanic man will take as tribal blood loss in the scarce-begun.

Over the shimmering horizons loomed another land: enfabled, ax-edged and distant, securely manned.

14. Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms 680-750 AD

The legions withdrew from Britain in the early 5th century AD, and the Romanised inhabitants were invaded by Picts and then various Anglo-Saxon peoples. Life reverted to bare existence as the Anglo-Saxons took control of Sussex, Kent, East Anglia and part of Yorkshire, while the West Saxons founded a kingdom in Hampshire under the leadership of Cerdic, around 520. There then followed a lull in the invasions, where the Britons exhausted themselves with civil wars and internal disputes. Settled kingdoms began appearing after 600 AD, notably in Wessex, Mercia and Northumberland. Viking raids started plundered the country in the late 8th century, and full-scale invasions began in the 860s. Kingdoms, centres of learning and churches fell quickly to the invading Danes, the only effective resistance coming from Alfred, the Anglo-Saxon King of Wessex.



Britain. Anglo-Saxon Ar sceat. Obv: Two diademed heads confronted; between, long cross with trident end; double border. Rev: Cross, at each end a bird right; double border (12 mm)

Sceats were small, thick, silver coins minted in England, Frisia and Jutland during the Anglo-Saxon period. The many designs include human figures, animals, birds, crosses, plants and monsters. Attribution is difficult when the coins lack inscriptions: some may have been issued by ecclesiastical authorities, others certainly come from urban and secular rulers. The coins were probably used for many purposes beyond simple buying and selling. Their brutish appearance echoes a brutish existence.

Anonymous Sceat

As emblematic of these brutal peoples, tough
 in expendable instances, though humdrum mysteries lie
 in farms, small fields and scattered hamlets cut from rough,
 hard tillage of hedgerows, thicket and unfriendly sky.

And so these small, thick coinlets found as though the blood
 were dropped from feuds and frequent battles all about.
 Tenaciously the water lily roots into the fetid mud,
 and maiden comeliness is scarce and blazes thinly out

to brief fecundities. The tumbled symbols show
 a cult in runic animals and of Christian cross.
 Childbearing had its mythologies but was always slow
 and, of course, in that, precipitant with human loss.

In the end offerings at the pursed maidenhead
 would become the munificent and provident that must be fed.

15. Sasanian-Umayyad

The Sasanian empire was created around 224 AD when Ardashir I, a descendant of Sasan, convincingly defeated the Parthians. Under Shapur I (241-272 AD) the central government was strengthened, the coinage reformed, and Zoroastrianism made the state religion. In the pomp and splendour of their kings, the Sasanians saw themselves as the successors of the Achaemenid Persians, and their expanding territories quickly brought them into conflict with Rome. By the end of Shapur I's reign, the Sasanian empire stretched from the Euphrates to the Indus and included modern-day Armenia and Georgia. Territories were lost under succeeding rulers, but restored by Shapur II (309-379 AD), who re-established control over the Kushans in the east and campaigned in the desert against the Arabs.



*Arab Sasanian Ar Drachm. 'Ubayd Allah b. Ziyad, Minted at Tisfun in 63 AH
Obv: Portrait of governor as Sasanian king with the governor's name written in Pahlavi script. Besm Allah (in the name of God) in lower right margin Rev: Zoroastrian fire altar with attendants: year of issue on left and mint at right. (32 mm)*

Khosrow II was the last king of Persia to have a lengthy reign before the Muslim conquest. Conversion to Islam was generally slow and violent, with Zoroastrian scriptures being burnt and priests executed. For generations many Persians maintained their original language and culture — as this Arab-Sasanian coinage suggests, where, to good-quality Sasanian drachms, the new governors simply added a few Arabic words.

Sasanian-Umayyad: Drachm

The incorruptible in placid silver as it was
 extracted from drifts and savage workings on the hills,
 the birth of innumerable beginnings, but more because
 of dynasties with florid if imperial wills.

Such were the Archaemenids, Parthians, Sasanians, each
 inheriting their herds of goats and meagre gains,
 but also opulence, magnificence, the fabled reach
 of tall, plumed warriors, horsed into the far campaigns.

Reluctantly, curmudgeonly, the governor looks
 beyond the triple circlet of the head. Ornate
 the former titles but the curbed bismillah brooks
 no opposition to the embodied God and state.

'Submit to the Almighty, the Compassionate, all
 who are now subject to the ringing muezzin's call.'

16. The Holy Roman Empire

Charlemagne (c.747-814) became king of the Franks when his co-ruling brother died in 771. Military campaigns dominated the early years of his reign. He conquered Saxony and converted its people to Christianity. He conquered the Lombards in northern Italy, and then invaded Moorish northern Spain in 778. Between 780 and 800 he added Bohemia to the empire, and then subdued the Avars in the middle Danube basin, creating an eastern buffer state to his lands.

Charlemagne went to the aid of Pope Leo III in 800 and put down the rebellion, for which Leo crowned Charlemagne on Christmas Day of that year. Charlemagne was declared emperor of the Romans, which legitimised his rule in Italy and elsewhere.

The vast territories ruled by Charlemagne became known as the Carolingian empire. Charlemagne introduced administrative reforms, establishing key representatives in each region and holding a general assembly each year at his court at Aachen. He standardised weights, measures and customs dues, which helped improve commerce, and introduced important legal reforms. Christianity was established throughout the empire, and Charlemagne persuaded eminent scholars to come to his court and establish a library of Christian and classical works.



Carolingians. Charlemagne as Charles I, King of the Franks, 768-814. Ar Denier Milan mint. Obv: +CARLVS REX FR, cross pattée Rev: +MEDIOL, Karolus monogram. (20 mm)

Charlemagne died in 814. None of his successors possessed his vision and authority, and the empire did not long survive him.

Charlemagne: Denier

Inveterate the title of king in the flowing locks and beard,
in the steel woven as always into Merovingian lords:
theirs was a reclaimed land, restless, one much seared
in consciences with Italy and the Avar hordes.

Such were the apostates of their recovered Rome,
with purple blood-lust draped about them, with on call
an obedient and copious Latin in their rough-hewn home:
the centre of an empire was this Frankish Gaul.

But Charles, the determinate of God, who did God's work,
and was crowned his emissary, had yet more to do.
Once officiated, there were duties he could not shirk,
an emperor of the holy where the Word rang true.

So small, plain and crimped was the coinage, but underneath,
unburied, the once-rich lands of conquest, stern belief.

17. The Fatimids

The Fatimids, who took their name from Fatimina, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, from whom they claimed descent, were a strongly Shi'ite dynasty that contested the Ayyubid rule of north Africa, and refused even nominal recognition of the Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad. During their first half century, the Fatimids ruled only north Africa and Sicily, where their Isma'ili orientation met with much resistance, but in A.D. 969, under the caliph al-Mu'izz, their troops conquered the Nile Valley and advanced across Sinai into Palestine and southern Syria. Arabic coins rarely contain images but rely on the power of titles and Koranic scriptures.



Fatimid dynasty. al-Mansur Isma'il (334-341 AH) Au Dinar. Mint: al-Mansuriya (Morocco), 339 AH. Legends in decorated kufic. Obv: centre legend: la ilah illa Allah / wahdahu la sherik lahu / Mohammed rasûl Allah (There is no God except Allah. He is alone. No partner to him. Mohammad is the messenger of God) Margin legend: muhammad rasul allah arsalahu bi'l-huda wa din al-haqq li-yuzhirahu 'ala al-din kullihi wa law kariha al-mushrikun (Sra 9 verse 33: Mohammad is the messenger of God. He sent him with the guidance and a religion of the truth in order that he might cause it to be bright over the (already-existing) religion).

Rev: 'abdullah / Isma'il el Mansur bi Allah / Mohammad rasul Allah / amir el-muminin. (little slave / Isma'il el Mansur bi Allah / Mohammad is the messenger of God / amir and leader of the faithful) Outer margin legend. Bismillah zuriba haza ed-dinar bi-'l-Mansuriyat sanat tis wa thelathin wa thelath mi'at (In the name of Allah was minted this dinar in Morocco the year 339). (22 mm)

al-Mansur Isma'il: Dinar

Blank between the central legend and the rim,
of bold design and well-attested purity.
Its flowered kufic is clipped and modest, almost prim,
as would be conquest if mere worldly things let be.

Truth was in the telling with a prayer-washed mouth:
between the legend and centre lies a sullen gold
denoting blistering hot lands in the dune-filled south,
whence came the brown-eyed slave girls, bought and sold

for grain and odd munitions. His immutable word
that blesses war and enterprise, as bless it must,
encircles the written circumference of the muezzin heard
calling the faithful to be upright, wise and just.

A world perfect in its symmetry, a distant rim
held in continual service and rapt silence to Him.

18. Counts of Anjou

Fulk V (1082-9 to 1143 AD) was count of Anjou, and latterly king of Jerusalem, from 1131 to 1143. Additionally, he was the father of Geoffrey Plantagenet and grandfather of Henry II of England. These coins, badly made but typical of the period, were struck for father and his son Fulk between 1069 and 1129.



Counts of Anjou: Fulk V (1109-29) Ar denier. Obv: small cross Pattée with Alpha & Omega surrounded by "+FVLCO COMES" legend. Rev: Fulk monogram with the legend "+VRBS AHDEGAVIS" (18 mm)

Intrigue, warfare and constantly shifting loyalties were a feature of these iron times. Fulk V went on crusade in 1120, and joined the Knights Templar soon after. He was noted as a kindly diplomat but seasoned soldier, and under his joint rule (with wife Melisende, daughter of Baldwin II, with whom he was often at odds) the kingdom of Jerusalem reached its maximum extent: fortresses still remain at Kerak, Blanchegarde, Ibelin, and Ascalon. Fulk was initially a supporter of Louis VI of France, but later switched sides, marrying his daughter to the son of Henry I of England.

The Fulks were colourful characters. Fulk III had his first wife, Elisabeth of Vendome, burnt to death in her wedding dress to punish her for adultery. He extended his power over the Counties of Maine and Touraine, but died at Metz, whilst on pilgrimage. Fulk V obtained Jerusalem by marriage, and died of a hunting accident.

Fulk V: Denier

Repudiating is the flesh in winter, as in serving wench,
or broken faith in kingdom and the crowns we win.

Yet, unwholesome as life is, there is more: the stench
of bodies flayed and slopped out in their dripping skin.

Abrupt and bitter trepidations of the rain
on battlements and limpid moats, the raw, gruff smoke
of wastes in sodden leaves and the wet films that stain
the floors of cold cathedrals where each conscience spoke.

How sobering is magnificence, but underneath thick smells
assassinate the flourish of their feudal names.

All spoke of plague-pits with rheum-daubed bones, the wells
of angry catechisms slobbering on drawn candle flames.

But from that flint-filled world, and more, from the keeps within,
would the reign of a chain-mailed God in Jerusalem begin.

19. Crusader Kingdoms

The Crusader Kingdoms were 12th-13th feudal Christian states created by Western European crusaders in Asia Minor, Greece and the Holy Land. They originated in the First Crusade's capture of Jerusalem and victory at Ascalonn, after which most crusaders returned home. Remaining, some Franks held Jerusalem, Antioch and Edessa, and went on to create crusader states on the western borders of the Seljuk of Rum and the Great Seljuk Empires.



Hugh IV, (1324-58) Ar Gros petit, first series. Obv. +HVGVE REI DE around king seated on throne facing front. Rev. B to left of king, +IERUSALEM ED' CHIPRE, around Jerusalem cross (26 mm)

Hugh IV (1293-96 to 1359) was King of Cyprus from 1324 to his abdication, and nominally King of Jerusalem to his death. He was largely content to rule Cyprus, however, and though he joined with Venice and the Knights Hospitaller to burn a Turkish fleet in Smyrna and capture the city, he prevented his son, Peter I, from going to Western Europe to recruit support for a new crusade to recover his Kingdom of Jerusalem.

Hugh was a cultivated man, with a deep interest in art, literature, and philosophy and Latin literature, but also strict on legal issues. He owned a summer villa in Lapithos, there organising philosophical meetings. Boccaccio wrote *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* at his request.

Hugh IV: Gros Petit

Always the smoke of rumour, more salacious wars:
perhaps the Holy Land was marked out for discontent,
for chain-mailed treacheries, and a caftaned cause
that brought injury to purpose, and what that purpose meant

to the small shires of Christendom, the second son
impatient for title and new-won spurs, who would not wait
for time's improvidence to give what his father's sword had won,
but took as wanted from comingled church and state.

A good land laden with olives, with millet, wheat and wine,
one lapped by a mosaic of fractured, nacreous waters that kept
off the breath of Saracen from the holy shrine:
the heart should be that temple: chastened, clean, well-swept.

Here martyrdom would serve for battle, a new-made earth
roistering in the obedience to a chain-mailed birth.

20. Trebizond Kingdom

The Trebizond Empire was a monarchy and one of three successor rump states that flourished on the shores of the Black Sea in the 13th to 15th centuries. The empire was founded in AD 1204, immediately before the sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade, and claimed to be the true Byzantine state, even after the Greek restoration. Trebizond in fact survived the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453, but fell to the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II after a month-long siege in 1461, when both ruler and family were taken into captivity, thereby marking the end of the Roman imperial tradition initiated by Augustus 1,488 years earlier.



Trebizond. Alexius III (1349-90) Ar Asper. Obv: St. Eugenius riding right on horseback; A in circle, EVG beneath to left; NH ligature to right; monogram below horse. Rev: Emperor, wearing loros and crown with pendilla, holding sceptre with three pearls, on horseback right; A to left, LEO with two tilde-like marks below; monogram to upper right; monogram below horse. (19 mm)

Trebizond was continually in conflict with the Seljuk Sultanate of Rûm, with the Ottoman Turks, with Constantinople, and even the Italian republics. It survived by playing off its rivals against each other, and by offering the daughters of its rulers: women famed for their beauty and generous dowries, especially attractive to the Turkish rulers of inland Anatolia. Trebizond relied heavily on wealth gained from its trade with Genoese and Venetian merchants to secure the resources necessary to maintain a precarious independence.

Alexius III: Asper

Lands forever evaporating into camel routes
yet bring the trader to this towered city. The sea
abuts, enfables and erodes existence, recruits
something of fabulous mythology in ennui.

Here pass spices and slaves, bulbous silverware
echoing the cavernous simplicity of cathedral bells,
good oil and wine: a much-embroidered pastoral care
rises above the incense, the market and marine smells.

Hope. Determination. The gritted sailor's eye
observes the profitable moorages, the sail's sharp snap.
Above the seagulls turn and turn about the bleached-thin sky
that goes on to eternity and seems to wrap

homilies of Byzantium into the smoky glass:
the caravans of hazard and advantage that blink and pass.

21. China: Northern Song Dynasty

In the Northern Song Dynasty (AD 960-1279) — shrinking to the Southern Song when the north was lost to Jurchen tribesmen — Chinese society reached its apogee of wealth and refinement. Its founder, Taizu, stressed the Confucian spirit of humane administration and the reunification of the whole country. He took power from the military governors, consolidating his hold at court, and delegated the supervision of military affairs to able civilians. A pragmatic civil service system was the result, with a flexible distribution of power and elaborate checks and balances.



Northern Song Dynasty Hui Zong Emperor (1101-25 AD) Ae One Cash. Obv: Da Guan tong bao in Slender Gold script. (1107-10 AD) Reverse: plain. (24 mm)

The Huizong emperor cultivated the arts, and was a noted painter and calligrapher, originating the 'Slender Gold' style employed on the coin above. Calligraphy is a combination of technical skill and imagination, acquired by laborious practice: it has to provide interesting shapes to the strokes and create beautiful structures from them without any retouching or shading. A finished piece of fine calligraphy is not a symmetrical arrangement of conventional shapes therefore, but something like the coordinated movements of a skillfully performed dance — impulse, momentum, momentary poise, and the interplay of active forces combining to form a balanced whole.

Less happily, the emperor is also known for disastrous statesmanship, which encouraged the Jurchen tribes of Manchuria to invade China. He abdicated in 1125 in favour of his son, but the new emperor reigned only two years before he and his father were hauled off to Manchuria, where they ended their days staring at barbarians and forest wastes.

Huizong Emperor: One Cash

Expression was an intricate but still defining dance
of intellect and strict proficiency, a skill
the hand would draw on intimately, with nowhere chance
obliterating the fragrant, imperial and all-powerful will.

For man is born in ignorance but not in sin.
Each stroke was large with character, and each one led
through these plain coins, here cast from copper, lead and tin,
to joyous elaboration, not a jot unsaid.

When in spring the petals drift into the West Lake, each
blossom looks a trifle bewildered as it falls.
What of Huizhong can these miracles of innocence teach
to the rough forested tribes of the Jurchen, where none recalls

the astonishing beauty of a slender gold calligraphy
in the bedraggled unfortunate he was soon to be?

22. Plantagenets 1327-77

Edward III (1312-77), who led England into the Hundred Years' War with France, and whose descendants contested the throne in the Wars of the Roses (1455-85), was an exceptionally long-lived and capable ruler. He became king in 1327 after his father was deposed by his mother and her lover, Roger Mortimer, and soon turned his attention to France. He assumed the title of king of France, landed in Normandy, and, accompanied by his son Edward, the Black Prince, won an important victory at Crécy. Following the subsequent victory at Poitiers, and capture of the French king, the Treaty of Bretigny in 1360 ceded Aquitaine to England. Later wars were less successful, and earlier gains had to be given up.



Edward III (1327-77) Au Noble, Calais. Obv: King standing, facing with sword and shield in ship, flag at stern, voided quatrefoil over sail ed/ward di gra rex angl z franc dns hib z aqvit Rev: Ornate cross, e and pellet at centre in panel, trefoils at corners, lion and crown in each angle, pellets by lis, double tressure, trefoils in spandrels. ihc avtem transiens per medivm illorvm ibat, (34 mm)

Edward's wife died in 1369, and the king fell under the influence of his mistress, Alice Perrers, who was seen as corrupt and grasping. With military failures in France and outbreaks of the plague in England, Parliament exerted its authority, criticising court ways and the heavy taxation. New councillors were to be imposed, but matters were interrupted by the death of the Black Prince, and the reforms were reversed by the king's younger son, John of Gaunt. Edward died on 21 June 1377, leaving his young grandson Richard II as king.

Edward II: Noble

The last of pre-Renaissance splendour blossoms out
into inscrutable brilliance. The shield and cross
still look to resurrection: there is never doubt:
retreat from high nobility is only loss.

What man may burnish out is in his feudal claim:
in that is his obedience, his inherent right.
An ancestry is family, birthright, a name,
as here set lettered out and in our Lord's plain sight.

The king is in his castle. The strident trumpet's call
diminishes with distance though the winds stand fair.
This was good land, temperate, with vines and orchards, all
buoyant as the ship was in this clear blue air.

Also good metal, well minted: in the treasury box
the taxes mount up from these loyal, well-sheared flocks.

23. Timurids

Timur (known to us as Tamerlane) created the last great Asian empire. In 35 short years he conquered Persia, the territories of the Golden Horde, the Sultans of Delhi and the Ottomans, and was embarked on a conquest of Ming China when he died in 1405. Gradually reducing in size, Timur's empire was ruled by his successors, the Timurids: a dynasty of some intellectual and cultural brilliance, from which descended Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire. Timur's passion was for architecture, but, while he greatly embellished Samarkand, he also destroyed Khiva, Baghdad, Damascus, Delhi and host of other cities.



Ar 1/6 dinar. Timur (Tamerlane), 771-805 / 1370-1405. Ar dirham. Obv: Kalima, date A.H. 785 and Samarqand mint. Rev: Timur citing Suyurghatmish as overlord. (17 mm)

Unlike the Mongol khans, the Timurids did not last long. The empire split into Transoxania and Persian sections in 1449, and decayed irretrievably into petty kingdoms during the 1451-69 reign of Abu Sa'id Mirzi. Timur, and more particularly his successors, created a magnificent court that fostered Persian culture, but the empire was brutally conquered by the sword, had little coherence otherwise, and was administered by only elementary forms of government, largely by taxation.

Timur: Dirhem

Not bloodshed: obliteration, piles of heads
and fires that darken all men's thoughts into the noon.
Across the trading lands the blaze of terror spreads:
the final settlement imperative, and also soon.

So all who live and prosper in these Muslim lands
will know submission and the Prophet's laws.
So is my mission here, and stated: so it stands,
across the wastes of Asia to the temperate shores.

A plot of earth and quiet is all the thereafter brings.
Titles, oblations in marble, the greatest conqueror knows.
Men living are pallid beside the blaze of eternal things:
as the breath of springtime so the soft wind blows.

See, on my coins, I take the appropriate sultan's name:
not even Genghiz in his conquests can touch my fame.

24. Henry VI of England

Henry VI (1421 – 1471) was King of England from 1422 to 1461 and again from 1470 to 1471, dying in the Tower of London, where he was probably murdered on Edward IV's instructions.



Henry VI Ar groat struck at Calis (1422-30) Obv: King's head facing in arches with fleur de lys (tressure). hEnRIC DI GRA REX AnGL Z FRANC (Henry by Grace of God king of England and France) Rev: Long cross, with two circular legends. Outer: POSVI DEVMA DIVTOR EMMEUM (I have made God my helper) Inner: VIL LA CALI SIE (City of Calais) and 12 pellets. (26 mm)

With military disasters in France and a collapse of law and order in England, Henry's rule became problematic, not helped by increasing rivalry between the Queen and Henry's popular cousin, Richard of York. Civil war broke out in 1455, initiating the long Wars of the Roses. Henry was deposed in 1461 after a signal defeat at Towton by Richard's son, who took the throne as Edward IV, but Henry was not finally captured by Edward's forces until 1465, being imprisoned in the Tower of London, and restored only briefly in 1470.

Henry VI was a well-meaning and pious incompetent, who suffered bouts of mental instability, possibly schizophrenia. Though loyally supported by his wife and powerful nobles, he had no capacity whatever for government, and, while this gentle and scholarly man did found important centres of learning, his reign was otherwise a disaster for England, which saw some of the worst excesses of the Wars of the Roses and the loss of all territories in France, except Calais (where the coin above was minted).

Henry VI: Groat

Kingship says how coveted a crown must be
in this rich land of pelleted and mute evasion.
Stiff necks bow to swift swords and dignity
is what walls us round with title and with dark occasion.

Who is to be more pitied than this poor mewling boy
who sits as God's elect in these strong English lands?
Where are the French realms now, or any Christian joy?
How languidly time dwindles through the hour-glass sands

into the mutinous silver. On blood-drenched Towton fields
the arrows fall in snow-thick flurries. The last men die,
knowing God forsakes them, and long fealty yields
only a thin, duplicitous inheritance and the friendless sky.

From last possessions the coin looks on to what was lost,
rimmed in the late resplendence of a killing frost.

25. Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain

Ferdinand, King of Aragon, and Isabella, Queen of Castile, ruled their countries jointly, introducing measures to strengthen their power. One was the Inquisition, aimed at Jews and Muslims mostly, the latter being expelled from the country after Granada fell 1492. With the Reconquista complete, the monarchs funded Columbus' voyages of discovery, opening up the New World to what became personal fiefdoms of the Spanish monarchs.

The two had only one son, and he predeceased them in 1497. The throne passed to Isabella's eldest surviving daughter, Joanna, and to her husband Philip of Burgundy, but Joanna's mental condition was the cause of many constitutional contrivances and indeed civil war when Ferdinand died in 1516.



Spain. Ferdinand and Elizabeth. Ar Eight Royals, after 1497. Obv: REX ET REGINA CASTELE LEGIONIS A[RAGONIS] (King and Queen of Castile, Leon, Aragon). The coin depicts personal emblems: Ferdinand's arrows and Isabella's yoke. Rev: FERNANDVS ET ELISABET DEI GR[ATIA] (Ferdinand and Elisabeth, by the Grace of God). Again shows personal arms: Granada in base. Letter S on left denotes Seville mint: VIII on the right (38 mm)

Yet, though that first union ushered in a golden age for Spain, the extraordinary precious metal wealth of the New World was squandered on wars and ceremonial display. Much of the silver in later reigns was never employed in Spain, but immediately warehoused for shipment east to China by bankers who controlled the financial fortunes of Europe.

Ferdinand and Elizabeth: Piece of Eight

Flat, unsentimental: on the broad, hard flans
the righteous splendour of emblazoned Spain is stamped.
Castille and Aragon, as though their wedding bans
would ring eternally, and through a new world camped

out on high, cold Inca lands, material flats,
on miasmas of silver in the ochreous limestone ores.
All was their patrimony, and in the simmering vats,
Peru to Mexico, enough for northern wars.

Where were the old gods now beneath the written skies,
the ancestors bedecked with gold and feathered plumes?
With comfort and dignity removed, they died as flies
from slaver's lash and hunger and the mercury fumes.

Yet even the malefic pointlessness had not then ceased
with silver stamped and warehoused for its journey east.

26. Renaissance Italy

Mercenary armies and condottieri were part of Renaissance Italy, and by marrying into the Visconti family the condottieri Sforzas became Dukes of Milan. Ludovico was a notable patron of the arts, employing masters like da Vinci to decorate a sumptuous court life. Though statecraft lapses unfortunately forced him to leave Milan in 1499, he was back the following year with a large army, which kept him in power until another miscalculation left him Louis XII's prisoner at the castle of Lys-Saint-Georges in Berry and then the chateau of Loches. After a failed escape bid in 1505, Ludovico was confined to castle dungeons at Loches, where he died in 1509.



Italy: Milan. Ludovico Maria Sforza (Il Moro), 1494-1499. Ar Testone, Obv: Cuirassed bust r., above, small facing head. Rev: Crowned shield of arms, above, small facing head. (28 mm)

Other Sforzas ruled Milan over the next half-century, until most of Italy came under Habsburg control, when religious conformity gradually asphyxiated the early artistic licence and independence of thought.

Ludovico Sforza: Testone

Beneath the blaze of summer blue and scattered heat,
lay sumptuous beauties in their plumed embodiments:
hills, orchards, fields sown thick with ripening wheat:
the raw-tanged bells still carrying the daily sacraments.

Great men were monsters loosened from the soil,
by massacres were watered, heaped up in shattered hopes.
To outwit France, Spain, Naples was a ceaseless toil
as known to rulers as farmers of the thin-soil slopes.

Yet money fuelled obedience; in splendid usury
they resurrected their marbled shadows from the past:
in that quixotic mix of eloquence and treachery
were Rome's half-thousand monuments again recast.

Sharp, glittering men, whom a clean-struck coinage made
indifferent to brutalities if they were paid.

27. England: Henry VII

Henry had only dubious claims on the English throne, but by representing the Lancaster cause and marrying into the York succession, he brought the disastrous Wars of the Roses to an end and gave England secure if sometimes over-centralised government. Henry VII promoted trade, struck agreements with other powers, avoided overseas adventures, whittled down the power of the nobility, and laid the foundations of the British navy.



England. Au Sovereign (undated: 1504-07) Obv:

HENRICVS:DEI·GRA·REX·ANGL·ET·FRAN·DNS·HIBN

(Henry by the grace of God King of England and France, Lord of Ireland).

Crowned king seated on wide gothic throne and holding orb and scepter. Rev:

IhESVS:AVTEM:TRANSIENS:PER:MEDIVM:ILLORVM:

IBAT:: (But Jesus, passing through the midst of them, went His way: Luke

4,30) Arms of England and France in a shield at the centre of the Tudor rose

surrounded by a polylobe. (41 mm)

Henry VII came to the throne without personal experience in estate management or financial administration, but became a fiscally prudent monarch who introduced stability to the financial administration of England by keeping the same financial advisors throughout. Taxation was improved and the nobles kept in check. To satisfy public outcry, he had his two most hated tax collectors, Richard Empson and Edmund Dudley, executed on trumped-up charges of treason. In short, this first of the Tudor monarchs kept a tight hold on the country's finances, and in later years devised ever more ingenious ways of raising taxes.

Henry VII: Gold Sovereign

An upstart provincial gentlemen, or little more,
whose claim was winked at, tooled until legitimate,
and in a land of sour apostasies, the rotting core
still needs its rose-like patterning of fair estate.

So here he sits as God on earth, his figure stamped
upon the heart of brief authority in man-made laws.
Round too, crenulated with power, are walls encamped,
won with the thrift of diligence in careful wars.

Greed that scrimps the bone undoes a fugative belief,
but that no matter: a king rides on a darkened calm.
In a long and sallow face they note the ill-shaped teeth,
and that inscrutable intelligence, devoid of charm.

In a land foreign to him, but palpably anglicised,
each piece was taxed and bitten into, thinly prized.

28. Joachimstaler 1525

The first to strike the long-lasting thaler denomination (from which the 'dollar' derives) was Stephen, Count of Schlik, who was lord of Joachimstal (modern Jachymov) on the Bohemian edge of the Erzgebirge (Ore Mountains). The Kingdom of Bohemia, the predecessor of the modern Czech Republic was an Imperial State in the Holy Roman Empire, where the Bohemian king was both a prince-elect of the empire and ruler of Bohemian Crown lands.



Bohemia. *Ar Joachimstaler of 1525 struck in name of King Louis of Bohemia. Obv: Figure of St. Joachim (father of Mary, mother of God) standing above shield and between date. S(anctus) I(oachim) AR(ma) : DOMI(norum) : SL(ickorum) : ST(ephani) : E(t) : 7 : FRA(trum) : CO(mitum) : D(e) : BA(ssano) Rev: Double-tailed bohemian lion. LVDOVICVS • PRIM(vs) D(ei) : GRACIA REX BO(hemiae) (40 mm)*

A silver fever had spread across Europe in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, unearthing new deposits like the Bohemian Kutná Hora discovery of 1298, which was worked by seasoned Saxon miners bringing with them their expertise, their customs and traditions of personal liberty. More important still was the Joachimsthal find in 1516, which was producing 3 million ounces of silver a year at its peak in the 1530s.

Thalers indeed became very popular because they were handsome coins of good silver content and sufficient size (often exceeding 40 mm) for the ruler's portrait to appear in splendid detail, supported on the reverse by a wealth of dynastic claims.

Bohemia: Thaler

He who makes repentance shall escape God's wrath,
in Joachim I stake out my rampant lion's claim.
Father of sweet Mary, let this rough-hewn staff
be measure of my footfalls in your holy name.

Who knows what pick and smoking candlelight will find,
that from the morning's threatened rain comes resplendent ore?
Sometimes there are roof-falls, even in the mind,
and over the mutinous silver the patience of the poor.

Praise that from the Erzgebirge comes at last
salvation in this thunderous draft of thaler pieces:
that fever is forever, when our day is past:
how bountiful the scatter of these mining leases.

And while the New World legends were long leagues away
this wealth was real and prodigal, and so would stay.

29. Ottomans: Suleiman (1494-1566)

The Ottoman Empire (1299-1923) once included Turkey, Egypt, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Macedonia, Hungary, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and parts of the Arabian peninsula and north Africa, an area amounting to 19.9 million sq. km. in 1595. The Ottomans suffered defeat at Timur's hands but went on to capture Constantinople in 1453, and reach the walls of Vienna in 1529 and 1683. The empire reached the height of its power in the reign of Suleiman I, but expansion was checked at the Battle of Lepanto (1571) and then in defeats by Venice and the emerging Safavid state.



Ottomans: Suleiman I Au dinar. Misr. Obv: Sultan Suleyman Shah bin Sultan Selim Shah / azze nasruhu / zuriba / fi Misir sanat / 926 (Sultan Suleiman Shah son of Selim Shah / May his victory be glorious / minted in Cairo / year / 926). Rev: Inscriptions in four lines within border of pellets. Darib al-nadr / sahib al-'izz wa'l-nasr / fi'l-barr wa'l-bahr (The striker of precious metal, the Master of Glory and the Victorious on land and sea) (19 mm)

Suleiman I, known in the west as Suleiman the Magnificent, and in the east as the lawgiver (kanuni), for his legal reforms, led armies to conquer the Christian strongholds of Belgrade, Rhodes, and most of Hungary before his ambitions were checked at the Siege of Vienna in 1529. To add to those accomplishments, he was an outstanding poet, goldsmith and patron of the arts. His marriage to a harem girl — Roxelana, then Hurrem Sultan — was equally unusual, as was the sultana's influence on the court and sultan.

Suleiman: Dinar

Like opium poppies and opulent, the white domes fill
with the melancholy of the far steppeland's wind-sown places,
a strong-ribbed eruption that billows over the embedded will
of nomads, high turbaned with riches, but bred of inner spaces

that tell of migrations, the endless packing of silks and rugs,
the rough-haired yurts reassembled under patchwork skies,
and always the tussle with the elements, where the past tugs
hard at the vast glaucoma that afflicts the eyes.

So they arrived, assimilating, had tall cities built,
shadowed with the janissaries, hard galleys of fighting men:
here on the edge of Asia was the Greek blood spilt,
with Saint Sophia and the others murmuring their last amen.

Across the insolent, dark waters of the Golden Horn
was the old world of the Prophet enfeifed, refabled and reborn.

30. France: Wars of Religion

The French Wars of Religion involved the fierce passions of the Catholic and Protestant causes, Catherine de Medici's ambitions and compromises, and the infirmities of her three sons, the last kings of the Valois line. None was well equipped to rule a divided country. Francis II married Mary Queen of Scots but remained a boy invalid. Charles IX was a nervous wreck if not altogether mad, and Henri III was a degenerate. Henry of Navarre was the compromise candidate and converted to Catholicism to end thirty years of bloodshed, becoming Henry IV in 1589.



Henry IV of France. Ar Demi-franc. 1590. Obv. A/ HENRICVS .IIII.D:G.FRANCOR.ET. NAVA REX. Rev. SIT+NOMEN +DOMINI+BENEDICTVM+1590 (29mm)

Henry was a man of vision, industry and courage. Rather than wage costly wars against the nobility, he simply paid them off, allocating the sums saved to the improvement of the country. He regularized the state finances, promoted agriculture, drained swamps to make productive crop lands, protected forests, undertook many public works, encouraged education and saw to construction of many roads, bridges and canals. Though a popular monarch blessed with kindness and good humour, and much loved by his people, Henri IV was assassinated by a fanatic in May 1610, possibly with the complicity of his second wife, Marie de Medici.

Henry IV : Demi-Franc

What can a world of common sense and kindly wisdom do
against the scourge and pillage of the Catholic mob?
Or even Protestants of any shape or hue,
though each will make at altar their tight-laced bob?

Embodied in this coin is my intrinsic sovereignty:
I am a King, so titled, here of France and of Navarre.
Inherent in such titles are the dark solemnities
of god and country that follows one guiding star.

See, on this side, dignity: an old man's face:
a laurel wreath, a broken nose, the jutting chin:
and on the other, nothing: an initial and then space:
a blaze in the firmament, where the besetting sin

is not to believe, but to believe too much
in the miracles of a king's all-healing touch.

31. Moghal India

Akbar consolidated the Moghal Empire of India by conquest and reconciliation. Though illiterate, he was a shrewd judge of character, and an enthusiastic patron of the arts. His interests extended to religious matters, and he invited adherents of India's many religions to debate their case, though often encountering only acrimonious exchanges of opinions and assertions. Perhaps there was no one true religion, only an overlapping core of beliefs that could serve as a simple but sufficient ethical and religious base? In 1582, Akbar instituted a new cult, the 'divine faith' (Din-i-Ilahi), which incorporated elements from Islam, Hinduism, Zoroastrian around his own person as prophet or spiritual leader. Such hubris won few adherents, but the event is commemorated in Akbar's coinage., where alif, or year one, i.e. the new millennium is announced. As a calligraphic narrative, the claims of the Mughal rulers are projected into a millenium to come — one over-optimistic, of course, and heretical to the faithful, but nonetheless looking forward to an era of universal peace and justice.



Akbar (1556-1605), Au Square Mohur, Urdu Zafar Qarin Mint, Alf (AH 1000). Obv: Kalima and invocations to the four caliphs in corners, i.e. lā illā Allah Mohammad rasūl Allah:bi-sudq Abī Bekr & bi-'adl 'Umat . bi-hayā 'Uthmān. bi'-ilm 'Alī. Rev: khallad Allah te'ālā mulkahu / Mohammad Akbar alif badshah/ Jalā ed-dīn ghāzī / zarb Urdu Zafar Qarin (May Allah on high perpetuate his kingdom / Mohammed Akbar AH 1000 Emperor / Glory of the faith, warrior against the infidels / Struck at Urdu Zafar Qarin)

Akbar: Mohur

All flourished out with rich, emolient calligraphy
that brims in square-cut mohur with its fatted gold:
whence comes the Urdu Zafar Qarin mint we see,
or each year's sinful passage made a thousand fold?

In abnegation and acceptance faiths must meet,
and, sorrowing, the world admit unending toil.
Regularly, if inexplicably, from rain comes heat,
and unremunerated earth makes for hurtful soil.

To mark the new beginning comes a call to prayer,
to bless the village markets and the soft millet fields:
the faithful and the infidel close woven in
to the manifold impressions that a harvest yields.

Another millennium we pray for, and for peace
abundantly prepared for in this coin's small lease.

32. Thirty Years's War

The Thirty Years War started as a religious revolt in Bohemia but eventually dragged in all the regional powers — Denmark, Sweden, Germany, France, Bohemia and Spain — who expended vast treasuries on fruitless efforts to gain territory or religious control. The greatest miseries were inflicted on Germany and Bohemia, which lost a third of their populations. The Swedish army alone destroyed 2,000 castles, 500 towns and 18,000 villages. Mercenaries inflicted every barbarity imaginable, and those who survived the killing often starved to death or were reduced to cannibalism. In their wake came epidemics of typhus, dysentery and bubonic plague, and to the religious fanaticism was added monstrous superstition that claimed the lives of witches: tens of thousand were burned in grotesque mockeries of justice.



Hungary (Habsburg Rulers) Au Dukat 1625 K-B (Kremnitz Mint) Emperor Ferdinand II 1619-37

The Thirty Years' War brought few benefits to anyone. Spain lost Portugal and the Spanish Netherlands. Sweden emerged as a major power, but enjoyed only short-lived control of the Baltic. France gained Alsace, but not a solution to its religious dissensions. The Protestant cause was saved, but Germany further fractured into a mosaic of independent states, postponing unity by another two hundred years.

Ferninand II: Dukat

What men may do upon the blood-curved lip of war
outdoes cold steel in callousness. A last crusade
to root out heresy and cankered growth, before
the plunge to plague-pits where even dignitaries are laid.

Castles levelled, cities sacked, villages erased,
the undefended raped and mutilated, left for dead:
false creeds so extirpated that the crowned heads gazed
on wild fanaticisms to which their blood-lust led.

Yet presses stamped out metal carefully, each drop
of gold was made accountable. The world went on,
companionably bewildering: it would not stop
at darkneses whence God or Lucifer had gone.

For so are men, from common decency released,
who follow, ravening, the blood-rimmed footprints of the beast.

33. Charles I of England

Charles I was the second, surviving son of James VI of Scotland, and grew up a slight, shy and lonely figure, keeping his Scots accent and a slight stammer throughout his life. His good humour, courteous manners, and blameless private life made a strong impression, but Charles entirely lacked the common touch and never mixed with his plain subjects. He was a knowledgeable patron of the arts, a fine horseman and a sincerely religious man, but from his father he acquired a stubborn belief in the divine right of kings, which combined with a certain deviousness and lack of interest in the genuine concerns of the House of Commons, led to civil war and the increased power of Parliament.



Great Britain. Charles I. Ar Three pence, Aberystwyth Mint, 1638–1642. Obv: King facing left, rose andf III in field. Rev: Shield with book mintmark.

Charles married Henrietta Maria of France soon after his coronation, but his war against Spain was unpopular, expensive and unsuccessful, leading to continual trouble with Parliament, which he attempted to bypass for taxation purposes. The issues continued throughout successive Parliaments, where Charles' high-handed ways further put out of reach all that was necessary for the smooth governance of the country. By 1642 the country was embroiled in a civil war, which the better-trained Parliamentary forces eventually won. Charles was tried for high treason in 1649, and executed at Whitehall, an act that horrified the crowned heads of Europe. After the efficient but joyless rule of Oliver Cromwell, a reformed monarchy was restored with Charles II in 1660.

Charles I: Threepence

Though canon may annihilate each city wall,
I am the ineffable and sole anointed king.
In me is majesty, a comeliness, with all
you see of upright gentlemen in everything.

You'll note how modestly is borne this kingly head
although its prudent sovereignty belongs to God.
A king initiates and blesses, but is never led
to the paths of cursed perdition unfrocked people trod.

And this you cannot take from me, the jewelled crown
here blesses all denominations as a pious act.
All flows from me: in every place to London town
my power is absolute in me, renewed, exact.

I know, first hand, what sword and heavy horse can do:
God keep me in that majesty, well silvered, true.

34. Imperial Russia

Peter I (1672–1725) made Russia into a world power. He was only the 14th child of Czar Alexis by his second wife, Natalya Kirillovna Naryshkina, and inherited a vast but poor and backward country. Nonetheless, by sheer force of will, Peter created a strong navy, reorganized his army according to Western standards, secularized schools, administered greater control over the reactionary Orthodox Church, and introduced new administrative and territorial divisions. He acquired territory in Estonia, Latvia and Finland; and through several wars with Turkey in the south, secured access to the Black Sea. Most importantly, he established the city of St. Petersburg on the Neva River in 1712, and moved the capital there from its former location in Moscow. The city became Russia's 'window on Europe'.



Russia. Peter I (1672-1725) Ar One Ruble 1725 (40 mm)

In 1721, Peter proclaimed Russia an empire and was accorded the title of Emperor of All Russia, Great Father of the Fatherland, and 'the Great'. Though an effective leader, Peter could also be ruthless and oppressive: his heavy taxes led to revolts, which were savagely put down. The man himself was intimidating at 6.5 feet tall, often drank excessively and did not shrink from personal violence. He married twice and had 11 children, many of whom died in infancy. The eldest son from his first marriage, Alexis, was convicted of high treason by his father and secretly executed in 1718. Peter himself died on February 8, 1725, without nominating an heir.

Peter I: Rouble

A land of forest deities and lifting marsh,
where ocean makes its inroads through the sedge and grass.
Irreproachably beautiful were the springs, but harsh
and burdensome the epiphanies of heat that pass

to stills of bright indifference. Each Finn's small hut
is cut of larch on clayey ground. They channelled through
the yielding circumstances, had the quays abut
the sovereign blaze of mornings in more mottled hue.

To look from the cold-enamelled waves of Baltic deep,
from glimmering shoals of herring in the fog-bound north,
to turquoise isles and kingdoms, was a splendid leap:
such the ubiquity of purpose the tsar's will brought forth.

So the old and new together, malarial, but home
to spectral visions in each towering arch and dome.

35. Georgian England

Georgian society was one of wealth, elegance and security for the aristocracy and expanding middle classes, but of brutal justice for others. Some twenty offences carried the death penalty. Trials were held at Newgate or the quarterly assizes, and tended to be brief as no defence counsel was automatically provided. For lesser crimes, offenders could be publicly flogged or branded. Those of previously good character might be offered transportation for life.

Only some 3% had the vote. Elections were public events, and voter bribery was expected. The two parties, Whigs and Tories, were more in the nature of factions, rewarding supporters with offices of state or one of the many 'rotten boroughs'. Robert Walpole, corrupt but the architect of cabinet responsibility and many features of Parliament even today, achieved law and order at home and sensible policies abroad, keeping both king and electorate on amicable terms. However venal, the system worked.



Great Britain. Au One guinea. Obv: Laureate Old Bust of George II facing left. *Georgius II Dei Gratia*. (George II By the Grace of God.) Rev: single large crowned shield with the quarters containing the arms of England, Scotland, France, Hanover, and Ireland. 1752 M B F ET H REX F D B ET L D S R I A T ET E (By the Grace of God, King of Great Britain France & Ireland, Defender of The Faith, Duke of Brunswick & Luneburg, High Treasurer and Elector of the Holy Roman Empire.) (25 mm)

The coin is a beautifully designed piece. The king's head fills the obverse flan very naturally, with the curls of the wig forming apt terminations to the legend. The reverse shield is particularly magnificent, and gives an air of opulence to the extensive coats of arms and abbreviated titles, a difficult feat in a small coin. All portrayed was true, but only to the more fortunate in society.

George II: One Guinea

A certain wealth and elegance, a firm restraint
in treating with the lower classes, those who bore
the flogging and transportations without complaint,
with life, beneath proprietary, a running sore.

In fine Palladian residences, papered walls,
the stucco ornament with well-proportioned brick,
were lives continually on show, with constant calls:
unflickering candlelight comes from a well-trimmed wick.

These, the mafiosas of their bright, new Guinea day
grew fat on peppers, sugar and tobacco trade,
but yet were always gentlemen who had their say
in crafting laws and taxes that their fortune made

dependent on his majesty's Britannic fleet —
well-tarred in readiness, fierce-manned and not discreet.

36. Papal States

From 754 to 1870, the Papal States were an independent territory on the Italian peninsula, gradually extended by Cesare Borgia, Pope Julius II and others through to 1631. The spiritual power of the papacy grew after the Counter Reformation, but political power waned. Napoleon invaded in 1796, and Pius VI and his successor, Pius VII, saw their states curtailed, occupied, and twice abolished. The 1815 Congress of Vienna restored the states to the Pope, however, and placed them under Austrian protection. Conspiracies and revolutions followed. Only French intervention at Rome prevented the total absorption of the Papal States during the Risorgimento, and Victor Emmanuel seized Rome in 1870, after the fall of Napoleon III. Pius IX refused to recognize the takeover and remained a prisoner of the Vatican. His successors followed his example, and the 'Roman Question' was only resolved in 1929 by the Lateran Treaty establishing the Vatican City.



Papal States. Pius VI (1775-99) Ae 2.5 Baiocchi. San Severino mint. Obv: Bust of St. Peter left. S·P·APOSTOLORVM PRINCEPS. Rev: BAIOCCHI DVE E MEZZO ROMANI 1796 (30 mm)

Pius VI (Giannangelo Braschi, 1717-99) had to meet the 1781 Edict of Toleration of the Holy Roman emperor Joseph II, whereby toleration was extended to non-Catholic minorities, 'unnecessary' monasteries were dissolved, diocesan boundaries were redrawn and seminaries were placed under state control.

Papal States: Baiocchi

Here was warm benevolence. A fellowship
of priests and faithful in the colonades imparts
the spell-bound catechisms on the trembling lips
of faith, earnest and abundant in capricious hearts.

Not perpetually was the great world put aside,
nor did the litany of prayers and candles blot out sins.
Beyond the impenetrable were men: they aged and died
to plagues of bigotry, when honest questioning begins

to pick at tardy consciences, unrouge the cheeks,
retire youth's sad tumescent in the feckless bone.
In the church's fabric the beetle ticks for week on weeks,
quietly, ever quietly, beneath each stifled groan.

And each, with errors commissioned in retrospect, is laid
out with the sound of men dying, bewildered and afraid.

37. Zaman Shah Durrani

The Durrani ruled Afghanistan and adjacent areas in the 18th-19th centuries. Kandahar was taken by Ahmad Shah Durrani after the death of the Persian Nadir Shah in 1747, and then Kabul, Herat and western India. Delhi was sacked in 1757, but the Mughals retained nominal control in exchange for Durrani suzerainty over the Punjab, Sindh, and Kashmir. Ahmad Shah died in 1772, and his son Timur Shah ruled Afghanistan from Kabul in summer and Peshawar in winter. Zaman Shah seized the throne on Timur's death and, to exert power over them, tried to reunite the family members dispersed by his father, but with little success. Conquests eastwards were blocked by the Sikhs, and the Shah of Persia was induced by the British to invade from the west. Zaman was forced to flee in 1800, but was captured in Kabul and blinded. Rescue came through the varying power struggles of the later Durrani, and Zaman lasted till 1844 in 'blind luxury' as a guest of the Sikhs and a pensioner of the British. The decorated calligraphy is typical of Durrani coins.



Durrani. Ar Rupee of Shah Zaman (r.1793-1801). Obv: Verse couplet in Persian: Obtained permanency by command of the Lord of both Worlds / Current coin of the realm through the name of Shah Zaman. Rev: Struck at Ahmadshah most noble of cities 1201, regnal year 2. (23 mm)

Zaman Durrani : Rupee

God moves in these high mountains, and the pinchbeck moon
looks down on bouldered paths and brushwood cut for fuel.
The world to come is elsewhere, like a half-heard tune
or a fire that lurks unkindled in the cob-cut jewel.

Forever bristling into loose confederacies,
hard fighting men, fierce in their honour, unafraid
of uniforms and rifles shipping in from overseas,
or the senseless brief manoeuvres that the British made.

All here relive their terms of service and go hence.
Spring is rain and planting, the summer heat and dust.
The wise man glories in the gifts of providence,
from the rough days of seasons passing as they must.

Set aside time for music and for prayers, for no one knows
where the spring wind comes from, wants, or where it goes.

38. Revolutionary France

Napoléon Bonaparte (1769-1821) laid the foundations of modern Europe. He rose rapidly in the army of the New Republic, prevented its collapse into anarchy, won an astonishing set of victories, became First Consul and then Emperor from 1804 until 1814, and again briefly in 1815.

Meritocracy, equality before the law, property rights, religious toleration, modern secular education, sound finances, and many other features of modern societies across the world were championed, consolidated and codified by Napoleon. To these he added efficient local administration, the encouragement of science and the arts, the abolition of feudalism and the greatest codification of laws since Roman times. Napoleon dominated Europe for a generation, and his military tactics are still studied. Yet the cost was enormous: six million Europeans dead, France bankrupted and her overseas colonies lost to England.



France. Napoleon I. Ar 5 francs. Obv: Napoleon Empereur. Rev : Empire Francais 1815. 5 Francs in laurel wreath.

Surprisingly, Napoleon was not personally intimidating, or even imposing, but slight in youth and pot-bellied later. A British observer in 1815 said, 'He is very sallow, with light grey eyes, and rather thin, greasy-looking brown hair, and altogether a very nasty, priestlike-looking fellow.'

Napoleon I: Five Francs

Always around him one felt the smoke, the thunder and the mud,
the sharp accolades across the soft, benumbing snow,
the bugle calls, and the rich, quick splendour of the blood,
the swirling of banners, under which all fortunes go.

Lives once hazarded will doubtless be again:
and he who hoards his coffers counts on fighting men:
Leipzig, Borrodino were small departures then,
and not debilitating, being two in ten.

And for the rest there was a France refashioned, built
on trade and industry, on codes, explicit laws
that placed the honest man at centre, not as spilt
diversions from an all-subsuming royal cause.

Say how that by a shop-kept folk and unfounded debt,
a small-minded, blustery kingdom beat him yet.

39. Industrial England

Whatever the individual injustices, land improvements in Britain under the enclosures acts and the flourishing overseas trade, had created a comparatively well-paid working class, waged several times higher than subsistence. Banking was well established. Coal gave mills and factories the cheapest energy in the world. Cotton textiles grew from an insignificant addition to British GDP in the mid-eighteenth century to be its largest, accounting for 8% in 1830 and 16% of manufacturing jobs. Technical improvements drove down the price of fabrics until they undercut the vast but handicraft textile producers of India, forcing workers back into agriculture. In England, when cottage weavers could not compete with cotton mills, their recourse was to mill and factory employment, as the workhouses instituted by the new Poor Laws made charity an unattractive option.



*Britain. Ae One Penny Token. Obv: ROLLING MILLS AT WALTHAMSTOW, lion standing left; ONE PENNY and date below. Rev: SMELTING WORKS AT LANDORE *, BRITISH/ COPPER/ COMPANY within wreath.*

When small denominations became scarce in Britain, many towns, cities, industries and merchants issued tokens in their place, often machine- and well-made in the 19th century. Copper and brass were the usual metals, but pewter, lead and occasionally leather tokens also appear, albeit for very local circulation.

England: Penny Token

Ubiquitous the uses the soft, red metal serves,
in no way disobedient to state or cause,
or later messages that stammer through its nerves;
indeed its large extraction led to trade and wars.

Soft-falling, obsequious are the heavy sheets,
as no doubt also are the shifting tides of men
who conquer the earth: from arctic cold to tropic heats:
continually recalled, collected and rolled out again.

How quickly, compendiously fastened will be the round
of bullet or fastening, or of copper pan, coin or stud,
how mutable and accommodating in alloy too, the ground
of all materiel, with steel, in that vast flood

of lemmings through the trenches, the gun emplacements, led
by men dazed and but still blood-hungry for their scrap of bread.

40. Free City of Frankfurt

Frankfurt was a major city of the Holy Roman Empire, from 885 to the collapse of the Empire in 1803, when the city was granted by Napoleon to Karl Theodor Anton Maria von Dalberg. The city then became known as the Principality of Frankfurt, and Catholics within its borders were granted emancipation. In 1810 Dalberg merged Frankfurt with the Principality of Aschaffenburg, and the County of Wetzlar, Fulda, and Hanau to form the Grand Duchy of Frankfurt. After the defeat of Napoleon, Frankfurt was returned to its pre-Napoleonic constitution via the Congress of Vienna of 1815, and became a sovereign city-state and a member of the German Confederation.



Frankfurt Free State. Ar 2 Thalers. Obv: Imperial eagle FREIE STADT FRANKFURT Rev: VEREINSMÜNZE and oak wreath enclosing 3½ GULDEN 2 THALER 1842. VII EINE F. MARK below. (40 mm)

Frankfurt continued as a major city throughout. The Confederation's governing body was located in the Palace of Thurn und Taxis, and, during the 1848 Revolutions, a Frankfurt Parliament was formed to unite the German states in a democratic manner. Here, indeed, the Prussian king, Frederick William IV, refused the offer of the crown of 'Little Germany'.

Prussia went to war with the Austrian Empire over Schleswig-Holstein in 1866, unleashing the Austro-Prussian War. Frankfurt, remaining loyal to the German Confederation, did not join with Prussia, but was annexed following Prussia's victory, becoming part of the newly formed province of Hesse-Nassau.

Frankfurt Free State: Two Thalers

Enterprise and caution make for burger's wealth,
combined with prescience in timing and in sensing worth:
all most necessary, as is practised stealth:
no crops can come from unmanured or stinted earth.

So the unruffled elegance of a well-bred man,
the cloth good woosted beneath the vivid blaze of silk.
All that was sensible, accommodating, in the van
of progress: cheeses crafted from unwanted milk.

Abstentions like the centuries were in the stony walls.
Beneath steep roofs, the blank oblong windows looked
down attentively on bustle and on business calls,
the latter made as ledgers, numbered, each one booked.

A stout, no-nonsense coinage stood for burger pride,
when clear accounts and godliness were close-allied.

41. Victorian England

The Victorian period is one of bustle, commerce and industry, less concerned with class differences, enjoying more mobility and access to greater commercial products that made everyday life agreeable, often with their raw materials transported across a colonial empire that spanned the globe: the queen eventually ruled one in five of the world's inhabitants.

Victoria is shown as an attractive woman, but also queen and empress. Her hair is done up into a bun behind, the strands sensitively detailed, with the laurel wreath emerging forward from the strands of hair to emphasize the responsibility of office, and the ribbon behind bifurcating, one strand falling behind her head, and the other breaking the wide expanse of the neck and shoulders. The portrait by L.C. Wyon was an extraordinary balance of elements: the bare but subtly-modelled expanse of face and bust, the plain background, the legend and delicacy in the details of hair and dress.



Britain. Ae One penny. Obv: Bust of Victoria facing left. Victoria D.G. Britt. Reg. F.D. around. (Victoria By Grace of God Queen of Britain. Defender of the Faith.) 22mm 28 gm Rev: Britannia seated facing right, holding trident and shield. ONE PENNY around. 1862 in exergue. (31 mm)

On the reverse appeared the seated figure of Britannia. Her left hand holds a trident that extends to the coin's rim. Her right holds a shield. Left and right appears a lighthouse and a ship in full sail, a discreet reference to Britain's naval power.

Victoria: One Penny

Warm-prinked in copper workmanship, the mintings spoke
of honest diligence throughout the offices of state.

No doubt there were others, many, oppressed and hungry folk,
but Church and landed gentry made Britannia great.

So God, who gave her colonies across the seas,
her workshops, factories, mines and thriving cotton mills,
imbued her with that English sense of decencies:
a maniless of conscience that persistence wills.

The queen exhibits now some fullness to the jaw:
it's ample but not too matronly the comeliness
of feature and high destiny, as though her rule foresaw
a cook and maid in every middle class address.

In all, a well-becoming, serious woman's grace,
accrediting the furtherance of class and race.

42. China: Taiping Rebellion 1850-64

Oppressive taxation, land hunger, decaying Manchu authority and subversive western notions created the Taiping Rebellion, a civil war that took the lives of 20-100 million people. The revolt against the ruling Manchu Qing dynasty was a millenarian movement led by Hong Xiuquan, a failed examination candidate and itinerant preacher who claimed through visions to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ.



Ae One Cash of Taiping Rebellion. 1860. Obv: Tai Ping Tien Kuo (great peace heavenly kingdom) Rev: Sheng Bao (sacred currency). (25 mm)

Hong established his capital at Nanjing and claimed rule over southern China. He promoted radical social reforms like sexual equality, property held in common, and the replacement of traditional Chinese faiths by his form of Christianity. The Taiping combatants also refused to wear the queue (pony tail), another affront to the Manchus, whose forces eventually crushed the rebellion with French and British help.

The rebellion was horrifically destructive of persons and property, but served as an inspiration to 20th century leaders overthrowing the old order, to Sun Yat-sen, founder of the Chinese Nationalist Party, and Mao Zedong, the communist leader who created China's present government.

Taiping Rebellion: One Cash

A mundane object for a mundane people, much
preoccupied with ploughing, planting, getting by.
All lives and crops are mutable, and known as such.
Each lapse in heaven's own mandate marks out more to die

by warfare and disease, whole cantons by neglect.
The heavens were everlasting but inscrutable: the once-wet earth
emptied by summer, by fat officials, analect
of power indifferent to what justice or their toil was worth.

Resist the Manchus, the pig-tailed, short and swarthy ones,
who to the middle kingdom brought their noxious ways.
Let there be peace and righteousness that our sons of sons
receive their patrimony to their end of days.

Sacred is the diminutive currency that man to man
speaks as the rice does rustling through the fields of Han.

43. American Dollar

American dollar coins were issued for over two hundred years, from 1794 to 2012. The Morgan dollar issue, named after its designer, George T. Morgan, was minted over the 1878-1904 period, and again in 1921. In all, some 656,930,590 pieces were struck. At a coin weight of 26.73 g, and silver purity of 90%, that entailed 1,742 tons of silver. Annual mintings varied considerably, from 100,000 for the 1893 issue to 86,730,000 for the 1921 issues from the Philadelphia, Denver and San Francisco mints. The E PLURIBUS UNUM legend (out of many, one) appears on the Seal of the United States, and was the de facto motto of the country until 1956, when it was replaced by IN GOD WE TRUST.



USA Ar One dollar. Obv.: Head of Miss Liberty wearing Phrygian cap and facing left. E. PLURIBUS. UNUM. (out of many, one) around. 1884 below head. Rev. (bald) eagle with outstretched wings and looking left and grasping crossed arrows and laurel branch. 'In God We Trust' above and laurel wreath below. UNITED STATES OF AMERICA . ONE DOLLAR. around. No mintmark (Philadelphia) (38 mm)

The silver comes from American sources, and was indeed one reason for issuing the Morgan dollar — to use the large amounts of silver mined in the later nineteenth century. Coins of other republics employed a similar figure of liberty but America's is distinctly her own. A new age was dawning, an industrial one, in which America was to lead the world.

America: One Dollar

Not born of rural Arcady or Paris fashion plate,
but doggedly, thick-throated, by sweated labour earned
and so made indispensable, not the gift of fate,
nor with the old world titles immodestly concerned.

Theirs was the patrimony of the fresh-cut earth,
where God's inheritance had poured such riches forth:
vast flocks of partridges, sturgeon with six-foot girth
from the flats of Mississippi to the windswept north.

The silver they mined in the calamitous west
through winze and adit, by the sulphurous water's fall
past rock-sheet and the rapids to wide plains, as best
employed for homely and for local need. Recall

the fancy-waistcoat bankers who, by sleight of hand,
turned all their mortgages to wind-filled dust and sand.

44. Korea

The Joseon dynasty ruled Korea for five centuries, from 1392 until its replacement by the Korean Empire in 1897. Much of modern Korean culture, etiquette, social norms, and current attitudes, and the modern Korean language itself derive from the culture and traditions of Joseon. The dynasty was severely weakened by invasions from neighbouring countries in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, however: from Japan in the 1590s, and from Manchuria thereafter. The first and second Manchu invasions nearly overran the whole peninsular, and the Joseon government therefore adopted a strictly isolationist policy, leading to the country becoming known as the 'hermit kingdom'.

Peace and prosperity benefited from such isolation, but the kingdom fared less well towards the end of the 18th century, and in the following century suffered internal strife, power struggles, and pressure from surrounding countries, notably Japan.



Korea Emperor Gojong 1886. 10 warn Gold-plated copper proof. Obv. 大朝鮮開國四百九十五年 ○ 십원 ○ 10 WARN around double dragon (Great Joseon founded 495 years ago 10 warn) Rev. + 圓 in wreath (10 warn) (27 mm)

In 1863 King Gojong came to the throne in 1863, under a regency that attempted to restore Korean independence, thereby clashing with the French in 1866, and in 1871 with the Americans who had adopted a gunboat policy. Japan forced Joseon to sign the Treaty of Ganghwa in 1876, opening three ports to trade and granting the Japanese extraterritoriality. Port Hamilton was occupied by the British Navy in 1885. Korea became a protectorate of Japan in 1905.

The Hermit Kingdom

The hermit kingdom with its late-rewritten tongue
at once simple and elusive, tonal and concise:
a land of high-gabled towns and monasteries among
the long blue fall of mountains into the flats of rice.

A land inherited but not a peaceful one,
more riven by feuds, for centuries the dynasties
put down with order, the long sword, latterly the gun,
within the fragile, all too fluid boundaries.

A land of beauty, but also the bending delicacy
of springtime cherry blossoms through the brutal rain,
and, underneath intrinsic silks and poverty,
a land much worth the threatening of, that will remain

for all that Japanese and Yankees make their suit
to a country hung there quietly like an unpicked fruit.

45. Late Russian Empire

The Romanovs ruled through families they ennobled, and from whom they took advice, but such a system of government required the tsar to be far-sighted, politically astute, sensitive to social and economic concerns, and of strong personality — none of which was present in Nicholas II.

Russia was slow to industrialize, but on the eve of revolution had 71,000 km of railway track, smelters producing 4 million tons of pig iron per year and mills processing almost as much cotton (from Uzbekistan) as Germany. Close on half the population was literate, but private banking was still rudimentary, and the country relied on foreign capital, funding the railways, for example, by selling securities overseas. The share of heavy industry in Russia's GDP rose from 2% in 1885 to 8% in 1913, but agriculture took the lion's share.



*Russia Nicholas II (1894-1917) 1915 Ar 20 Kopek. Obv: Crown *20* KOPEK 1915 in four lines, all within wreath. Rev: Imperial coat-of-arms.*

Even the coat of arms, which shows the imperial double-headed eagle, the escutcheon of St. George, and the arms of Astrakhan, Siberia, Georgia, Finland, Kiev-Vladimir-Novgorod, Taurica, Poland and Kazan on the wings seems less a confident display of power than something fabulously ornate, antique and vaguely preposterous.

Nicholas II: 20 Kopeks

A kinder world in prospect, on the cusp of change,
that had its Romanovs but more the middle class,
with education acts and factories: surely it was strange
that the refractory aristocrats were not put to grass.

Indeed they still commanded in a war now lost
into the haze of mud and ammunition: guns and clothes
retrieved from millions dead, but few to grasp the cost
of mutinies more pressing than governments suppose.

Yet still the silver glitters in its ancient ducal claims:
ornate and preposterous, the double-head eagle's wings
are familiarly extended, and each title names
receipt of balls and taxes, and still more mundane things.

And so the knout is loosened to a ribboned ease
over the smooth, full flood of silver that it oversees.

46. Communist Russia

Economic breakdown, war weariness, and discontent with the autocratic system of government overthrew the tsarist government, but the coalition of liberals and moderate socialists brought to power was itself overthrown by the Bolshevik coup d'état of 25th October 1917. Rule was thenceforth through the communist party, and repression was part of the system, from Lenin to Gorbachev, though most markedly in the Stalin era when the country was brutally industrialized. Economic growth was mixed but by no means unsatisfactory till the 1980s, however, after which all aspects languished until the Gorbachev reforms, which quickly and unintentionally led to the break-up of the Soviet empire.



Soviet Union Ar One Ruble 1921-2 issue. Obv. five-pointed star bearing figure 1 and surrounded by oak wreath. 1922 below. Rev.: hammer and sickle with ears of corn. Legend around is 'ПРОЛЕТАРИИ ВСЕХ СТРАН, СОЕДИНЯЙТЕСЬ!' (Workers of the world, unite!) Edge description is 'ЧИСТОГО СЕРЕБРА 4 ЗОЛОТНИКА 21 ДОЛЯ (А.Г) (33 mm)

Leaving aside the commemorative pieces, not devoid of propaganda but often better designed, the circulation coinage was strictly utilitarian, and seems as soulless and unimaginative as the cities of Soviet central Asia. Wages were fixed, and covered the basic necessities of life. There was little choice between generally badly manufactured goods, and money could not be exported.

USSR: Rouble

Blue-toned and dominating in its ornate wreath,
with thick-plumped wheat, the hammer and sickle spoke
of brotherhood, of common peoples bent beneath
the exploitation that their commune system broke.

Across the migrained, winter-shrouded distances
there was another world: one honest, kind, made bright
with industry. A million willing hands showed instances
of this clear message: workers of the world unite.

It was a world where all would earn a decent wage,
and work together in their sweat-stained brotherhood,
where God's own promises of Eden came of age:
to each as each one needed, from all as any could.

Incendiary the message, and that one red star
still glimmered over the gulags, with all hope far.

47. Nazi Germany

When the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, the economy had largely collapsed, unemployment was high, there were no colonies to exploit, still ruinous war-reparations to pay, and no prospects of either attracting foreign investment or of obtaining credit. Yet through an independent monetary policy of sovereign credit and a full-employment public-works program, the Third Reich turned a bankrupt Germany into the strongest economy of Europe inside four years.

In contrast to the USA, economic recovery preceded rearmament, and indeed enabled it. In contrast to Russia, the Nazi planners did not work with revolutionary zeal but moulded the existing form of decentralized capitalism into a more effective centralized system with large combines that supported national aims.



Germany (1933-45) Zinc One Pfennig Obv: Deutsches Reich around Eagle and 1943 below. Rev: Reichspfennig (17mm)

Central to Nazi success was the Work Creation Program that between January 1933 and July 1935 increased the number of employed Germans from 11.7 million to 16.9 million. By propaganda, removal of dissent and brutal coercion of the work-shy, unemployment was banished from the German economy and the entire nation brought into constructive enterprise. Inflation was curbed by wage freezes and price control. Attempts to bring countrymen of adjacent countries into a greater Germany foundered on existing power structures, however, and brought the devastation, death camps and population removals of WWII.

Germany: One Pfennig

An iron-forged and purposeful, autarchic state,
folk-built on common enterprise the Party named,
but as for lebensraum, the spilling soil that fate
awarded them as worthy of, that stayed untamed.

Indeed withheld. Here a gnarled and antique script
fills out the obverse with its brutal wings outstretched.
It spoke of materials in prospect, owner's rights unclipped
and communality, in pressing hardship etched.

Not trains but consciences to run on time: a call
so manifest a Volk set down its deeper roots
to race and destiny, so resurrecting all:
how could the weeding out produce unwholesome fruits?

Hard boots and faith: the re-envisioned future stamps
the torch-lit rallies out of children's summer camps.

48. Botswana

Botswana is one of Africa's more stable nations. Its earlier history is known only in outline, but at some time between 200 and 500 A.D. the Bantu peoples of Katanga migrated into what is now South Africa. In the nineteenth century they felt threatened by the Ndebele tribes and Boer settlers, and, after appeals on personal visits to London by Botswana leaders, the peoples (some eight distinct tribes) were in 1885 brought into the British Protectorate of Bechuanaland. Independence was granted in September 1965, and the Republic of Botswana has generally remained stable, governed throughout by the Botswana Democratic Party.



Botswana Cu-Ni 25 Thebe Obv: 25 Thebe Zebu (hump-backed ox) Rev: BOTSWANA Zebra supporting coat of arms. 1976 IPELENG (25 mm)

The country has followed the guidelines laid down by the departing British: prudent fiscal policies, international financial and technical assistance, and a cautious foreign policy. It is rated as the least corrupt country in Africa, and enjoys the fourth highest gross national income.

The strong economic growth of the country has been founded on diamond mining (in production second only to Russia), coal and tourism. Half the Batswa live in rural areas dependent on livestock and subsistence farming, which contributes 2.8% to GDP, mainly through beef exports.

Botswana: Twenty-five Thebe

In truth the mother country cared for its benighted souls,
where Commonwealth that dawned would be perpetual day.
It welded local elements to subtle wholes,
for surely here was queen and country they would obey.

While they were prosperous, that is, in the hard-hauled wealth
of coal and diamonds, where the open pits were things
to wonder at, but paid for bus to school and health:
such are the benefits that independence brings.

So in the warmth of metal and homely metaphors
of crops and livestock there was a common purpose won,
and wheat-ears whispering together spoke of cause
where tribes and tribal enemies could be as one.

Here the elders in their scattered lands have rest
accepting only that the white man's ways are best.

Envoi

Exhumed from grained mahogany or stringent oak,
the constellations pour out in their panelled trays,
in different mints and issues, how that coining spoke
of things intangible, beyond a strict account of days.

So in this blaze of scholarship, each tray is prompt
to castigate our errors as original sin,
now spent the woodlands where we careless children romped,
and time, that's negligent of no one, calls its truants in.

And as to intuitions in the sovereign air,
in the blunt, hard stink of copper, the silver hiss of head:
where did those notions lead to, tell me what was there,
now, in the Ur-lands of evening, that can be simply read?

Is it in miniature conceptions collectors live,
or in the struck completeness that these pieces give?

How to Read the Poems

I hope these poems will speak for themselves, but, if they prove baffling, it may help to know that they attempt to do five things:

1. Describe some aspect of coin that evokes a flavour of the times they represent.
2. Say a little more than is needed for simple description, i.e. build on the larger responsibilities inherent in the words, creating a penumbral echo of meaning that further develops the historical themes noted above.
3. Draw on the approach of the earlier Geoffrey Hill, with its broken rhythms and white-space patterning. Unlike his work, however, the poems both start and end with material circumstances, i.e. do not indulge in Hill's abstruse speculations which usually enclose lacunae of meanings, either because Hill has not rounded the circle of his thoughts or (as Postmodernist theory asserts) because meaning is inherently fragmentary and incomplete. These poems are not Postmodernist, but make their meaning through the verse structures that draw the sense together.
4. Explore the possibilities of the rhymed hexameter, a challenging but rewarding medium in English.
5. Extend the scope of serious poetry by grounding commentary in mundane objects that existing independent of the poem.

Bar the first and last poems, which provide a background to my early coin-collecting days, each piece is a tightly compressed meditation on the coin illustrated. Much could be written on every exhibit, many thousands of words, no doubt, but the text accompanying the coin should provide entry points, and anything obscure can be checked on Wikipedia and the like.

Stress verse, six syllables to the line, is used throughout, and the rhyme scheme follows that of the Shakespearean sonnet. Because the rhythms are often irregular and broken, I have made the end rhymes conspicuously heavy, giving the poems a solidity they would not otherwise have.

References and Further Reading

Those wanting the numismatic background will find the following useful:

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