

New Face of Old Coins

– Secondary Use and Reuse of Coins in Archaeology

Ana Pavlović

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Metal coins (Germ. *Münze*, Cro. *kovanica*) represent a phase in the historical development of money during which people were trying to develop an appropriate medium of exchange that would facilitate the necessary everyday exchange of goods. The characteristic that differentiates it from the previous, pre-monetary forms of payment is the clearly indicated owner's assurance that the sign, the figure or the name confirms the value of the coin – the weight and the composition of the metal alloy from which the coin, most often round, is minted, or, less often, cast. Coins in classical Antiquity did not retain only its monetary function, but like many other archaeological objects, it outgrew its mere utilitarian purpose and started to be used for purposes other than payment.

Even in societies that were, according to certain characteristics, completely monetized, in which money was the omnipresent and basic way of performing market transactions, money was related to series of other functions: religious, ornamental or utilitarian, where coins would lose their primary function of “money”, and become symbolic items – gifts, ornaments, jewelry, or ingots.

The most common secondary use of coins developed immediately following the introduction of the earliest coins in Asia Minor, in Lydia in mid-6th c. BC, and it came from the fact that without some kind of metal or alloy (electrum, gold, silver, copper, bronze, lead, potin, etc.) there can be no coins. The coined money is primarily a metal object whose use, if its monetary function ceases, can be extended or recycled precisely due to its intrinsic value: it can be reshaped into another metal object; be melted and thus serve as a new source of metal; be stored as a permanent store of value; be used as an accounting unit. Its reuse is not only physical. As evidenced by both written and archaeological sources, coins had a series of other social functions even during times when their monetary function within the society they circulated in was guaranteed. Secondary use has no time limit. A coin can be transformed into something else within the society itself, or it can be transmitted, as a valuable object and legacy of the past, into another era or world.

From the moment the first coins were made, there was no period of human history in which their recycling was not recorded. Whichever period, civilization, people or group we choose, if they are familiar with coins, they are also familiar with some form of their secondary use. In this overview, we will limit ourselves only to certain periods, primarily Antiquity and Middle Ages, and to certain phenomena within these time ranges, immediately pointing out that the selected repertoire is only a short overview that does not even try to provide a complete picture of a very wide and complicated topic of use and reuse or “secondary life” of coins.

The importance of coins is evidenced, among other things, by the term that is attached to a whole series of objects in archaeology: the so-called “coin-shaped artefacts” (Fr. *objects monétiformes*). The term was born and started evolving in the 19th century, and today it is being attached to everything that has the appearance or the shape of a coin, or that can be confirmed to have developed from a coin, although it never had monetary uses, except in certain cases. Fillings, fibulae, pendants, nails, rivets, etc. are some of the objects that are often described as “monetiform”. The breadth and comprehensiveness of the term “money” is so great that some of its characteristics are even getting attached to items that did not have the role of real, officially emitted money. Bronze medallions, contorniates, tesserae, spintriae and jetons are therefore sometimes referred to as pseudo-monetary forms.

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