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# DAILY COIN RELIEF!

## A BLOG FOR ANCIENT COINS ON THE PAS BY SAM MOORHEAD & ANDREW BROWN

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Issue 10 by Andrew Brown – 28 March 2020

### The 'legionary' *denarii* of Mark Antony, c.32-31 BC (Reece Period 1)



In the build up to the decisive Battle of Actium on the 2<sup>nd</sup> September 31 BC between the combined forces of Mark Antony and Cleopatra on the one hand and Octavian (the future emperor Augustus<sup>1</sup>) on the other, Antony struck vast quantities of silver *denarii* to pay his troops. These were struck in their tens of millions either at travelling mints in Greece or possibly at Patrae, his winter headquarters. So-called because they refer directly to the individual Roman legions, the legionary *denarii* are by far the most common Republican coin type seen in Britain, in part because of the sheer volume issued but also because they circulated some several centuries after Actium. Indeed, the Shapwick Hoard<sup>2</sup> of more than 9,000 *denarii* buried in c.224 AD contained 260 legionary *denarii*, now some 250 years old! The PAS records c.415 examples as single finds, with many more identified amongst hoard groups.

The legionary *denarii* are a standard, distinctive type that is easily recognisable (more on this below):



**Fig. 1: WMID-9AFA16** – *denarius* of M. Antonius, travelling mint, c.32-31 BC  
Obv.: ANT·AVG III·VIR·R·P·C, A galley right, border of dots  
Rev.: LEG XX, Aquila between two standards, border of dots  
**RRC 544/36**

**Note – all legionary *denarii* are variants of RRC 544**

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<sup>1</sup> We may look at Augustus separately in a future blog

<sup>2</sup> Abdy, R. and Minnitt, S., 'Shapwick Villa, Somerset' *CHRB XI*, 2002; Abdy, R., Brunning, Richard, Webster, C.J. 'The discovery of a Roman villa at Shapwick and its Severan coin hoard of 9238 silver denarii' *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 2001

## The Second Triumverate, 43-33 BC



**Fig. 2: YORYM-4BBA0E – denarius, M. Antony and M. Barbatius Pollo, 41 BC**  
Obv.: M ANT IMP AVG III VIR R P C M BARBAT Q P, Head of M. Antony right  
Rev.: CAESAR IMP PONT III VIR R P C, Head of Octavian right  
**RRC 517/2**



**Fig. 3: WMID-869B96 – denarius, M. Lepidus, 42 BC**  
Obv.: LEPIDVS PONT MAX III V R P C, Head of M. Lepidus right  
Rev.: CAESAR IMP III VIR R P C, Head of Octavian right  
**RRC 495/2a**

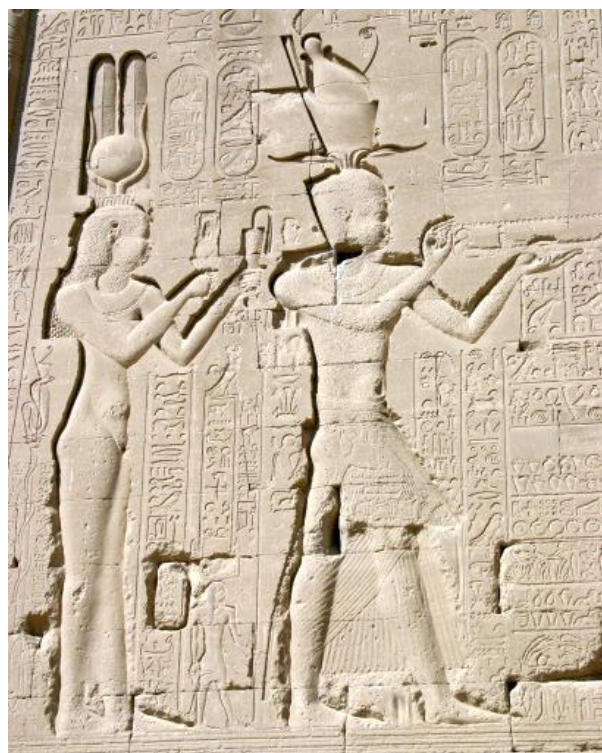
The assassination of Julius Caesar on the Ides of March 44 BC created a new power vacuum in Rome and effectively triggered the gradual demise of the Roman Republic. A period of political posturing between Caesar's allies eventually resulted in the passage of the *Lex Titia* on the 27<sup>th</sup> November 43 BC, which formally established the *Second Triumverate* – essentially a three-man dictatorship between Rome's most powerful figures (**Figs. 2-3**) Mark Antony (Caesar's Master of Horse), Gaius Octavius (Octavian – Caesar's adopted heir), and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus (a statesman and the last *Pontifex Maximus* of the Republic).

The three men, the *Triumviri Rei Publicae Constituendae Consulari Potestate* (the 'three men for the reconstruction of the Republic with consular power') took power for an initial period of five years that renewed in 38 BC for a second period lasting until 33 BC. Initially, the three worked together to avenge Caesar's assassination, instigating a period of proscription against Caesar's enemies to restore the Roman treasury. Notably, they defeated Caesar's assassins Marcus Junius Brutus and Gaius Cassius Longinus at the Battle of Philippi in 42 BC, and subsequently Sextus Pompey in Sicily. However, the alliance soon unravelled. Lepidus was increasingly sidelined and was eventually forced to submit to Octavian, who exiled him in 36 BC. The relationship between Antony and Octavian became increasingly strained and this ultimately pushed the Republic to conflict.

## Antony and Cleopatra

Antony married Octavian's sister, Octavia, in 40 BC and controlled the eastern Roman provinces with Octavian in the west. He turned his attention to the conquest of Parthia but Octavian was not supportive and instead he gained backing from his lover, Cleopatra VII of Egypt (**Fig. 4**), amassing a huge army in what was ultimately a disastrous campaign. He did claim victory in Armenia though and now openly living in Alexandria with Cleopatra distributed his Kingdoms amongst her children. Her son, Caesarion, was elevated to the title King of Kings and more significantly proclaimed the legitimate son and heir of Julius Caesar. This sparked political conflict between the two men. Octavian highlighted Antony's treason to the Senate, denouncing him as an enemy of Rome who had started foreign wars in Armenia and Parthia without their consent, not to mention attempting to bypass the Senate to establish Caesarion as a new dictator (alongside his own personal slight over Octavia). Antony in turn divorced

Octavia and accused Octavian of usurping his position.



**Fig. 4:** Cleopatra and Caesarion from a relief at Dendera, Egypt.

In 32 BC, the Senate declared war against Cleopatra and stripped Antony of his powers, a third of the senate abandoning Rome for Greece to side with Antony. The result was a gradual build up to a decisive naval battle, the Battle of Actium, in the Gulf of Actium (Epirus, Greece) on the 2<sup>nd</sup> September 31 BC. Here, Octavian defeated the combined forces of Antony and Cleopatra, signalling the end of the Republic.

## Coins of Cleopatra (Fig. 5)

Coinage depicting Cleopatra is very rare in Britain. She is represented on silver and bronze issued from the eastern kingdoms, notably Antioch and Egypt, and on a Republican *denarius* issued by Mark Antony, of which just two examples are recorded through the PAS:



**Fig. 5:** *denarius*, M. Antonius, 32 BC (**BM-1E03D6** and **LEIC-7341C9**)

Obv.: [ANTONI ARMENIA] DEVICTA, Head of Mark Antony right

Rev.: [CLEOPATRAE] RE[GINAE REGVM FILIORVM REGVM], Diademed and draped bust of Cleopatra right

Travelling mint, **RRC 543/1**



## The legionary *denarii* – RRC 544<sup>3</sup>

Estimates suggest the legionary *denarii* were produced in their tens of millions. They are of distinctive type, the obverse references Antony and his titles, while the reverse depicts legionary standards and names an individual legion or cohort. There are 39 varieties of this coin type (including seven rare gold *aurei* varieties) naming 23 legions, three that also have honorific titles, the *Praetorian* cohorts, and the *speculatores*.<sup>4</sup>



**Fig. 6: NLM-7C3197:**

### Obverse – ANT.AVG III.VIR.R.P.C

ANT[onius] AVG[ustus] III.VIR[tresviri].R[ei].P[ublicae].C[onstituendae] – Antony, augur<sup>5</sup>, one of the three men for the reconstruction of the Republic. The type is a galley, sometimes viewed as his flagship.

### Reverse – LEG XV

This example names the *Legio XV Apollinaris* between legionary standards, but there is a full range of legions represented in similar way from LEG PRI for the first legion through to LEG XXIII for the 23<sup>rd</sup>. On worn coins it is often difficult to tell which legion is represented.

### Debased silver

The legionary *denarii* notably have lower silver content than other *denarii* of this period – a fact noted in antiquity by Pliny in his *Natural History* (33.132). This resulted in them staying in circulation for an extended period of time as they were not hoarded or removed from circulation for their silver in the same way as other issues. Combined with the volume struck this is why we see so many as British finds. It also means that very often they are hugely worn. If you see a *denarius* that is almost a flat, blank disc of silver with very little detail in relief take a closer look as there is a very good chance it is a legionary *denarius*.



**Fig. 7: SWYOR-EB377B**

A typical worn legionary *denarius* as a British site find. **RRC 544**

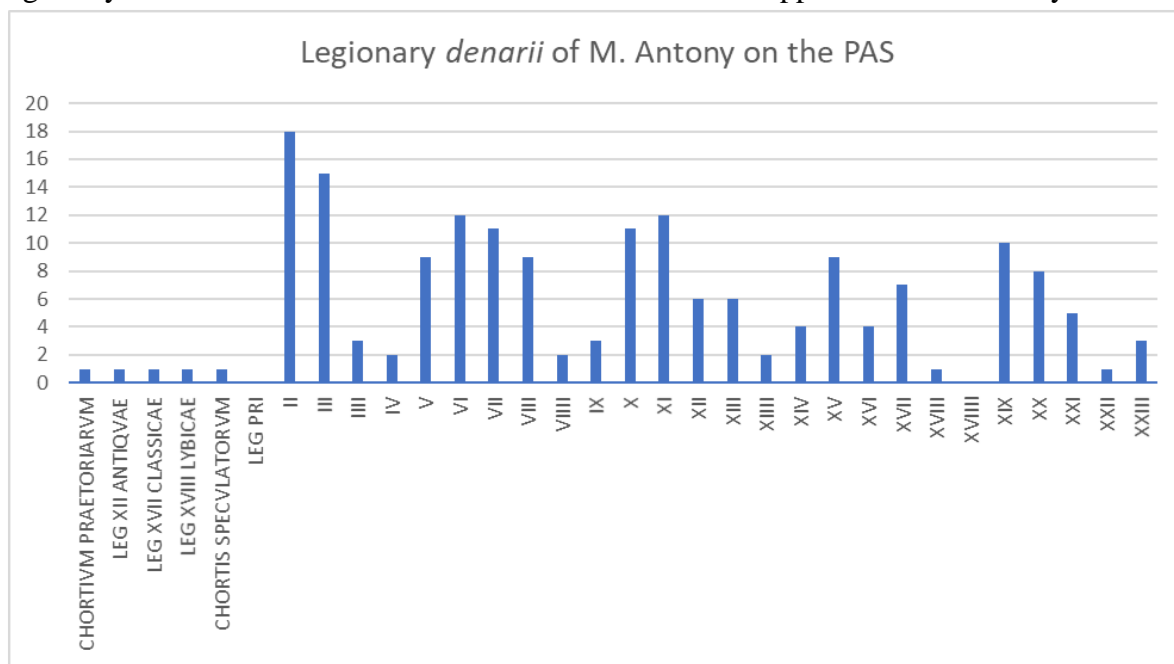
<sup>3</sup> The standard reference for these *denarii* is Crawford *Roman Republican Coinage* (RRC), no. 544

<sup>4</sup> Reconnaissance troops or scouts

<sup>5</sup> A priest of Rome

## The Legions

Amongst the c.415 or so legionary *denarii* identified to date on the PAS, it is possible to identify the legion name or number on 178 examples – not quite the 225 needed to pay a legionary soldier for a year! The vast majority are too worn to identify more closely. What **Table 1** shows is that almost the full range of *denarii* of this type is represented on the PAS. We just lack any coins for the 1<sup>st</sup> legion (LEG PRI) or for the 19<sup>th</sup> legion with the longer legionary number of XVIIII instead of XIX. LEG II and III appear most commonly.



**Table 1:** Legionary *denarii* on the PAS – all but LEG PRI, and LEG XVIIII are represented.

## Unusual types: Honorific and Cohorts

Only single examples of types with longer legends are represented in the PAS data. **Note**, the legends for these types run around the top of the standards rather than below/between them:



**Fig. 8:**  
**LON-AB8FD8**  
Rev.: LEG XII  
ANTIQVAE  
RRC 544/9



**Fig. 9:**  
**PAS-9AE984**  
Rev.: LEG XVII  
CLASSICAE  
RRC 544/10



**Fig. 10:**  
**GLO-9617E5**  
Rev.: LEG  
XVIII  
LYBICAE  
RRC 544/11



**Fig. 11:**  
**LANCUM-D538C8**  
Rev.: CHORTIS  
SPECVLATORVM  
RRC 544/12

Note – this type has different standards

## Legionary Types



**II (544/14)**  
NARC-8CE58E



**III (544/15)**  
DENO-ECF982



**IIII (544/16)**  
SF-FA5CB9



**IV (544/17)**  
LEIC-A60E8F



**V (544/18)**  
PUBLIC-  
4CD1C9



**VI (544/19)**  
GLO-1742C2



**VII (544/20)**  
HAMP-E980F3



**VIII (544/21)**  
LANCUM-  
76AD98



**VIII (544/22)**  
BERK-5095E3



**IX (544/23)**  
NCL-9A5A11



**X (544/24)**  
SUSS-96130C



**XI (544/25)**  
GLO-523733



**XII (544/26)**  
PUBLIC-  
A03174



**XIII (544/27)**  
LIN-83392C



**XIII (544/28)**  
SUR-E41BD0



**XIV (544/29)**  
HESH-60BFC5



**XV (544/30)**  
BM-2AB938



**XVI (544/31)**  
SF-E894A1



**XVII (544/32)**  
BH-74BF70



**XVIII (544/33)**  
SWYOR-  
1B5279



**XIX (544/35)**  
ESS-80F5D0



**XX (544/36)**  
WMID-  
9AFA16



**XXI (544/37)**  
LIN-F86692



**XXII (544/38)**  
BH-225667



**XXIII (544/39)**  
SOM-B4065C

**Fig. 12:** Legionary types on the PAS by RRC 544 number



### Contemporary copies (Figs. 13-16)

It is worth noting that copies of Antony's *denarii* do also appear on the PAS, usually in the form of plated copies (*fourrées*: Figs. 13-15), but occasionally just very base examples (Fig. 16). As with copies of any early *denarii*, the tell-tale sign is usually the base metal core showing through the plating, or the plating flaking away from it.



Fig. 13: PUBLIC-5F55DF



Fig. 14: GLO-EC44BD



Fig. 15: BM-2AB938



Fig. 16: YORYM-4DEBB0

### Bankers' marks (Figs. 17-19)

Many examples also exhibit punched marks on their flans. One theory suggests these are bankers' marks to determine whether a coin was genuine or plated, however they may also have been a means of accountancy for those wealthy enough to accumulate large sums! There are multiple examples on the PAS:



Fig. 17: NARC-6E4784



Fig. 18: LEIC-A60E8F



Fig. 19: GLO-1742C2

## Actium and the end of the Republic<sup>6</sup>



**Fig. 20: NMGW-54F4C3** – contemporary copy of a *denarius* of Augustus commemorating victory at Actium, c.29-27 BC. Copying RIC I, no. 264

Octavian's victory over Antony and Cleopatra had huge consequences for Rome. Antony's fleet and legions had deserted him and he returned to Egypt. By August 30 BC Octavian's forces invaded Egypt and, upon hearing rumours that Cleopatra had committed suicide Antony did the same. Cleopatra was, however, still alive and Antony was taken to her where he died in her arms. Now a captive of Octavian, Cleopatra attempted several times before finally succeeding in committing suicide herself, purportedly by the bite of an asp brought to her in a basket of figs. Octavian swiftly removed his other political threat, having Caesarion killed shortly after Cleopatra's death.

With Antony (and Caesarion) out of the way, Octavian was pre-eminent in the Roman world. He had control over every institution, popular and military support, and sought to restore some form of law and order while upholding the traditions of the Republic. His new title from 27 BC of Augustus highlighted his power and ultimately the end of the Republic and beginning of the Roman Empire with him as its first emperor.



**Fig. 21: BH-768118** – *denarius* of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus commemorating the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Actium. Issued solely for the *Legio VI*. Mint of Rome.

Obv.: ANTONINVS AVGV R III VIR R P C, A galley

Rev.: ANTONINVS ET VERVS AVGV REST LEG VI, Legionary eagle between two standards.

**RIC III, no. 443.**

Anerley, 28 March 2020

<sup>6</sup> An excellent read on this topic is D. Stuttard and S. Moorhead *31 BC – Antony, Cleopatra and the Fall of Egypt* (British Museum, 2012)