
DAILY COIN RELIEF!

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

Issue 20 by Andrew Brown – 9 April 2020

The *semis*



In the early Imperial period, the smallest bronze denomination in circulation was the *quadrans* (see **Daily Coin Relief no. 8**). However, it was not the only small bronze issue in use and alongside it we see the slightly larger *semis*¹. As its name implies, this was valued at a ‘half’ (*semis* = half), in this instance a half *as*, so with twice the value of the *quadrans* but still needing 800 for the equivalent to a gold *aureus*! *Semisses* are small brassy coins (c.15-20mm in diameter and up to c.5g in weight), giving them greater intrinsic value than the coppery *quadrans* despite them being similar in size – a factor that can be very difficult to distinguish on worn or corroded examples. There are, however, various features that allow for the separation of the two, even if there often remains some difficulty in ascribing a coin to one or other denomination.

Bronze *semisses* are known from the Republican period, at which point they were usually struck with a bust of Saturn on the obverse and a ship’s prow on the reverse, importantly carrying a letter S to denote the *semis* value. These are very rare as British finds though², so we are essentially dealing here with coins ranging from the reign of Augustus (31 BC-AD 14) through to Hadrian (AD 117-138). Like the *quadrans*, the *semis* is rare as a British find. To date, there are c.80 examples identified nationally with 35 PAS examples, although I am sure there are more to be found or that have been attributed to other denominations (especially the *quadrans*) in site reports/publications and within the PAS data. For the latter, I think it likely that there could be very worn examples recorded as *asses*. Typically, a *semis* will be smaller in size and weight than an *as*, but unlike the *quadrans* usually carries an Imperial portrait on the obverse.

¹ As with the *quadrantes*, the work of J. van Heesch is again a good starting point: J. van Heesch *Studie over de semis en de quadrans van Domitianus tot en met Antoninus Pius* 1979 (in Flemish) here: <https://tinyurl.com/t36v66d> ; see also J. van Heesch ‘Providing Markets with Small Change in the Early Roman Empire: Italy and Gaul’ *Revue Belge de Numismatique* 155, 2009: 125-142: <https://tinyurl.com/tmr5k4j>

² We will look at Republican bronze coinage in Britain in a later edition.

Augustus (31 BC-AD 14)

During the reign of Augustus a series of smaller bronze denominations were struck at the mint of Lugdunum (Lyon) and from c.AD 9 onwards name Tiberius as the Imperial heir. These have a distinctive reverse type depicting the Great Altar of Rome and Augustus at Lugdunum (**Fig. 1**). This was established at the seat of the *Concilium Galliarum* – the meeting point for the three Gallic provinces – in Lugdunum from c.12 BC and inaugurated to Augustus on 1 August 10 BC³. There are several series of Altar coins, with at least five British examples of *semiss*es including three on the PAS (**Figs. 2-3**), one of which (SF10579) lacks an image.

Fig. 1

Semis of Augustus, c.AD 9-14

British Museum example R.6280

Obv.: [CAESAR] AVGVSTVS DIVI F PATER

PA[TRIAE], Laureate head of Augustus right

Rev.: ROM ET AVG, The Altar of Lugdunum

RIC I, p. 58, no. 234.



Fig. 2

Semis of Augustus, c. AD 9-14

Obv.: [CAESAR AVGVSTVS DIVI F PATER PATRIAE], Head of Augustus(?) right

Rev.: ROM ET AVG, The Altar of Lugdunum

RIC I, cf. nos. 234, 246

LON-E7C88E



Fig. 3

Semis of Augustus, c.AD 9-14

Obv.: TI CAESAR AVGVST F IMPERAT VI, Bust of Tiberius left

Rev.: ROM ET AVG, The Altar of Lugdunum

RIC I, cf. no. 243

HESH- E68E74



³ This was the same day that the future emperor Claudius was born in Lugdunum!

Nero (AD 54-68)⁴

Although a few early coins make their way to Britain, it is with the Emperor Nero that we see a sudden increase in examples of *semiss*es. In part this is a result of the large volume of bronze coinage struck at the mint of Lugdunum from AD 64⁵ that proliferates Gaul and Britain at this time. Of the c.80 *semiss*es noted 34 of these (17 PAS examples including 5 IARCW Welsh coins) are Neronian issues from his mint at Lugdunum and fall essentially into two main types. Note that there are multiple varieties of each type that change based on Nero's various titles in the late AD 60s - these can be very difficult to separate out even on relatively well-preserved coins. There are also examples issued from the mint of Rome, the distinctive diagnostic feature being the small globe at the point of the bust seen on Lugdunum mint coins.

Roma type (AD 65-68) – 15 examples, 7 on PAS (including 3 IARCW coins)

The first major type has a reverse depicting Roma seated left on a cuirass, SC in exergue.



Fig. 4

Semis of Nero, c.AD 65

Obv.: NERO CLAVD CAE[SAR

AVG GER], Laureate head right

Rev.: PONTIF MAX TR PO[T IMP P

P], S C, Roma seated left on cuirass

Lugdunum

RIC I, cf. no. 482

HAMP-F9B448

Table type (AD 65-68) – 13 examples, 6 on PAS (including 1 IARCW coin)

This type depicts a table with an urn and wreath, a shield against the leg, S C in exergue. Many coins of this type have a small letter S on the table too denoting the *semiss* value.

Fig. 5

Semis of Nero, c.AD 65

Obv.: NERO CLAVD CAESAR

AVG GERM, Bare head right

Rev.: CER QVINC ROM CON, S

C, A table with urn and wreath

Lugdunum

RIC I, p. 179, no. 486

HAMP-F2E09F



⁴ The standard reference for Nero should be **RIC I**

⁵ We may look at Nero's coinage separately in a future edition of the blog

Distribution of Neronian *semisses*

Fig. 6 demonstrates the distribution of all the Neronian *semisses* noted to date. These are clearly confined to southern and south eastern England, with a small group in Wales near Caerleon. The heatmap in **Fig. 6** is based on the findspots of all the *dupondii* and *asses* of Nero recorded through the PAS. As is visible from this, the *semisses* largely fall into the same circulation area as the other medium sized bronze denominations. It is worth noting that while there were no examples in Bath of Nero, there are multiple examples at sites like Richborough, St. Albans, and London, suggesting that the *semiss* in the Neronian period may have had some limited circulation in Britain.

There is much work to do on the coins of this period and I am sure more will appear in collections and publications around the country.

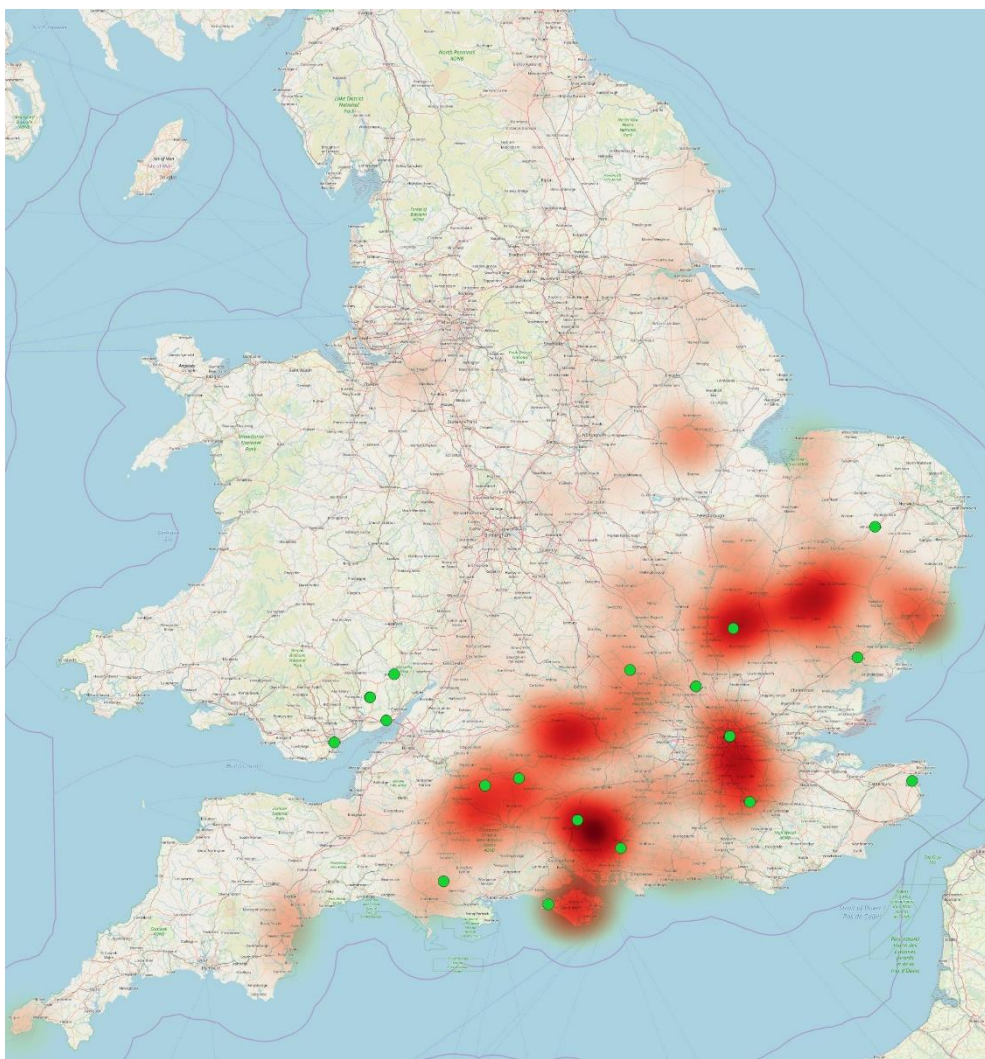


Fig. 6: *Semisses* of Nero in Britain. Green dots represent single findspots, while the heatmap is for all Neronian *dupondii* and *asses* on the PAS.

Trajan (AD 98-117)

Although *semisses* were struck in the Flavian period, notably for Domitian, there have been no examples securely identified on the PAS. It may well be that some coins of Domitian recorded as *quadrantes* or alternatively as *asses* need to be re-examined to rule out the possibility they could be *semisses*. This is a problem that occurs also with the next group of coins with Trajan (AD 98-117). B. Woytek⁶ has published an extensive analysis of Trajan's coinage that includes a refinement in the organisation of these small bronze denominations. Some of the coins currently recorded as *semisses* need to be reassessed against Woytek's catalogue to rule out any possible discrepancies. However, we do have some that can clearly be placed into the *semis* category.

Trajan has a range of *semis* types, with 20 examples noted at the Sacred Spring in Bath, but there are only six coins on the PAS and only two of those have identifiable types.



Fig. 7

Semis(?) of Trajan, c.AD 114-117

Obv.: IMP CAES NERVA TRAIAN AVG, Laureate head right

Rev.: S C, A she-wolf right Rome.

RIC II, no. 691

LEIC-6910A3

This coin, with Imperial, portrait may well be a *semis* rather than a *quadrans* (see Woytek, 2010).

Fig. 8

Semis of Trajan, c.AD 116

Obv.: [IMP CAES NER TRAIAN] O[PTIM(O) AVG GERM], Radiate head right

Rev.: [DAC PARTHICO P M TR P XX COS VI PP], S C within a wreath.

Eastern mint?

Cf. RIC vol II p 290 no 644 or 646;

Woytek, 2010: p 541-2 nos 935 or 937

PUBLIC-81A4E7



Based on its size and weight (c.21mm diameter and 5.35g in weight) an additional example from Norfolk (NMS-240401) is likely to be a Trajanic *semis*, but its reverse type is worn completely smooth. Three remaining examples (LIN-C572F9, NMS-BB0D76, and PUBLIC-28E26B) have no images attached to their database record and cannot be verified fully.

⁶ B. Woytek Die Reichsprägung des Kaisers Traianus (98-117) (MIR 14, Vienna, 2010)

Hadrian (AD 117-138)

Semisses disappear in Britain with Hadrian, although 13 examples have so far been identified including seven recorded through the PAS (with one IARCW Welsh coin amongst them). As with the Trajanic coinage, extensive work has been completed on Hadrian's coinage with the recent publication of Richard Abdy's new RIC Hadrian (**RIC II.3**)⁷. This suggests that several of the small bronze issues previously recorded as *quadrantes* on the PAS and elsewhere may instead be *semisses*.⁸ For British finds this presents interesting new data since the majority of the Hadrianic coins noted to date (9 examples) are of one single type, **RIC II no. 623a**, dating to c.AD 119-122. This has a reverse type depicting a *rostrum tridens* (a ship's prow):



Fig. 9

Semis of Hadrian, c.AD 119-122

Obv.: IMP CAESAR TRAIAN

HADRIANVS AVG, Laureate head right

Rev.: P M TR P COS III, S C,

Rostrum tridens right

Rome

RIC II, p. 421, no. 623a

SUSS-D04328

Other examples:



Fig. 10: WMID-F4A47E



Fig. 11: FASAM-63FC2E



Fig. 12: for comparison an example in the BM collection (BM: R.9411)

It is curious that this is the only type seen frequently in Britain but that there are no examples amongst the several thousand coins at the Sacred Spring in Bath (See D. Walker, 1988). Conversely, the three *semisses* recorded at Bath, one of **RIC II no. 688** with lyre reverse type and two as **RIC II no. 689** with legionary standards, are not represented elsewhere in the province to date other than in a single example from Kent recorded through the PAS (**Fig. 13: KENT-128B14**) that may be a *semis* but has a tripod reverse type which in the original RIC II is attributed as a *quadrans*.

⁷ **NOTE** – I am using the original RIC references here as many of you will not yet have access to RIC II.3

⁸ See also van Heesch *Studie over de semis en de quadrans van Domitianus tot en met Antoninus Pius* 1979 (in Flemish), pp. 110-127, here: <https://tinyurl.com/t36v66d>

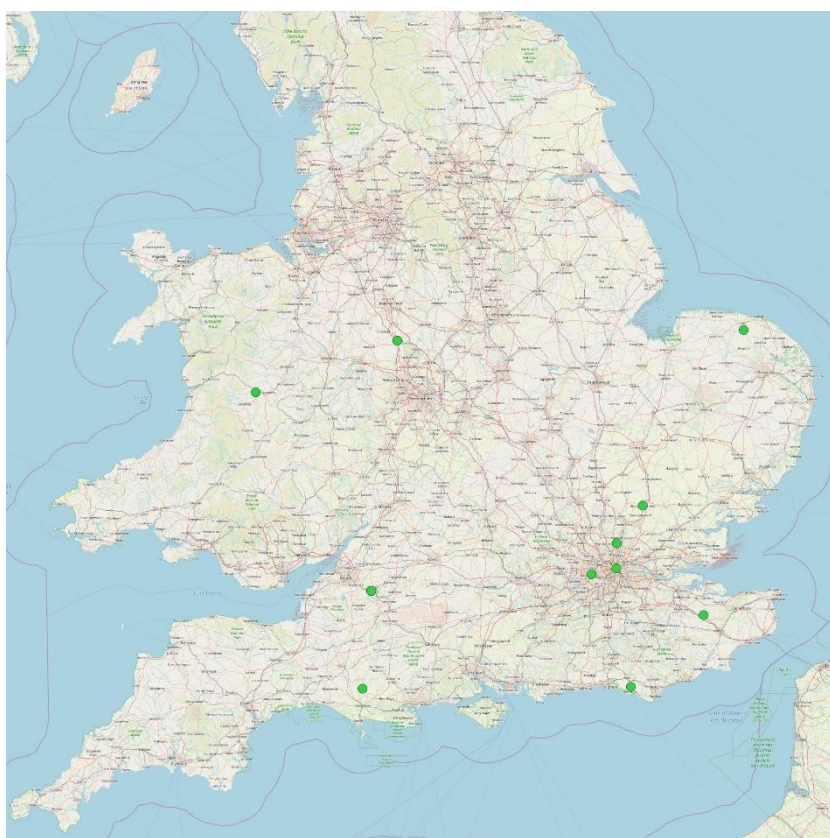


Fig. 13
Possible *semis*? of Hadrian, c.AD 122-125
Obv.: [...], Laureate bust right
Rev.: [...], Tripod?
Rome.
Cf. RIC II, no. 688 (*quadrans*)
KENT-128B14

Distribution of Hadrianic *semisses*

With so few examples of *semisses* securely identified to the Hadrianic period, it is difficult to draw too many conclusions with regard to their distribution. As with Nero, the spread is generally in the south and in the areas where bronze coinage experienced the greatest extent of circulation in the early Roman period.

Fig. 14 Hadrianic *semisses* in Britain. All are as **RIC II, no. 623a**, with the exception of the examples in Bath and single find in Kent.



What is perhaps more interesting is what the movement of these Hadrianic coins might point to in terms of Roman Britain. As we have seen with the *quadrantes* (**Daily Coin Relief edition 8**), there appear to be distinct groups of small bronze coins that could potentially have made their way to Britain as discrete batches of small change, perhaps carried or moved as a result of military activity. Is it possible that we are seeing the same thing with the *semisses*?

What we can say is that the types most regularly seen as single finds don't appear in big assemblages like Bath, in much the same manner as the *quadrantes*, perhaps meaning they were also not in the same regular pool of currency circulating within the province. There is also some historical evidence that might support their potential movement to Britain in batches and with the legionary soldiers. We know that Hadrian moved the *Legio VI Victrix* to

Britain in AD 119 and that they were involved in the construction of Hadrian's Wall in AD 122 (see **Fig. 15**). Given that all of the *semisses* recorded to date belong to precisely this period when the *Legio VI* was moving into the province, it is quite plausible that they came with them in much the same way the *quadrantes* may have done earlier. The general lack of variation in types may also add weight to this.

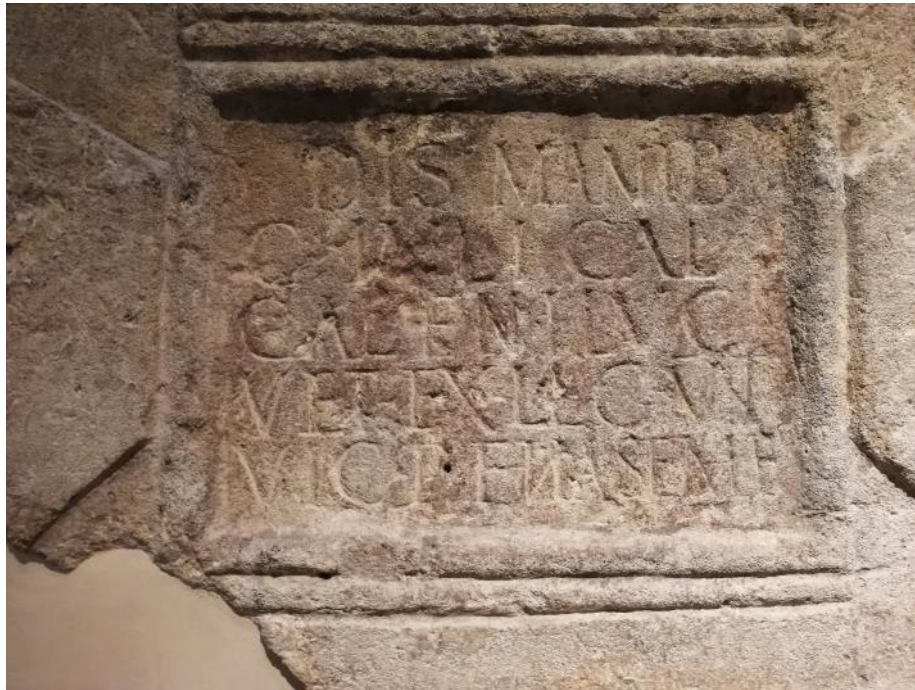


Fig. 15: Tombstone base of *Gaius Julius Calenus*, a native of Lyons, brought to Britain in AD 122 to help with the construction of Hadrian's Wall. Found in Lincoln. BM: 1866.12-8.1

Of course, this is all slight conjecture at the moment until we have a bigger corpus of material to work with. However, hopefully it will encourage you to double check those very worn *asses* or slightly oversized *quadrantes*, just in case you have a *semis* instead...!

Anerley, 09 April 2020