

Countermarked augustan tresviral sesterce with «punched Dolphin to r.» of likely sicilian provenance: a new contribution to the distribution of this image among legionaries

Un sestercio triunviral de Augusto con contramarca «delfín de la derecha» de probable procedencia siciliana: una nueva contribución a la difusión de esta imagen como símbolo legionario

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Resumen: Un sestercio de Augusto con contramarca punzonada «delfín a la derecha» proporciona más información sobre el uso y la difusión territorial de la imagen de los animales marinos en el ejército romano, con referencia particular a la armada, colocándose en relación con las contramarcas documentadas en bronce de Gades y los tipos que circulan en el área del Danubio inferior.

Palabras clave: Roma. Moneda romana. Flota romana. Gades. Danubio. Moesia. Pannonia.

Abstract: A sestertius of Augustus with a punched countermark «dolphin to r.» provides further information on the use and territorial diffusion of the image of the marine animal in the Roman army, particular connected to the fleet, placing itself in relation to the widespread countermarks on the Gades bronze and the several types circulating in the area of the lower Danube.

Keywords: Roma. Roman coinage. Roman fleet. Gades. Dunubio. Moesia. Pannonia.

Premise

The brief note is meant to serve as an update to a 2006 article in the journal *Numisma* that presented a then unknown countermark showing a «dolphin and trident», which probably originated around Pannonia or Moesia. That countermark was understood to be in close relation to the deployment of legions, especially those involved with the Roman fleet stationed along the Danube¹.

¹ MARTINI, 2006: 325-331.



Fig. 1

I recently had the chance to deal with a group of specimens with two countermarks of ascertained Sicilian production that depict a «standing divinity», with no further specification, and a spiked helmet. These images have been traced to significant distribution around the Moesian limes, in addition to their primary distribution in Sicily, which is broadly documented in the preceding bibliography. They can also be seen to bear likely relation to specimens from the Roman military context².

The relationship between legionary deployment and Sicilian coinage, a phenomenon to which some sort of testimony was borne precisely by the occurrence of the two countermarked coins around the Danube, appears to once again have come into play with the Augustan sesterce that is countermarked with the punch shaped like a dolphin facing right, which has been traced to Sicily.

The coin

The specimen was recently published in the *Sylloge Nummorum Romanorum* series for Italy and is preserved at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale coin cabinet in Florence³:

Obv.: OB / CIVES / SERVATOS – Oak wreath between two laurel fronds

Rev.: P LICINIUS STOLO III VIR A A A F F - Letters SC in field; countermark punched in shape of «dolphin to right» inside the capsule created by the letter C.

Æ, 22,10g; inv. 33724/231; RIC I², 345; SNRItalia, *Firenze* I, 241.

The coin is a sesterce issued in the name of the mint magistrate P. Licinius Stolo (fig. 1) attributable, on the basis of style and minting technique, to the central mint in Rome, despite its slightly below-standard weight for triumviral bronze coinage.

The countermark

There can be no reasonable doubt, especially given the patina on the line stamped into the planchet surface to make up the image, about ruling out recent striking of the «dolphin facing right» device. However, its manufacturing technique, punching, does leave some room for speculation as to the exact period in which it was struck, given its overall greater simplicity of application, i.e. preparing the punch and striking, compared to minted countermarks.

² MARTINI, 2017: 235-259.

³ CATALI, 2012.

The ancient moneyer meant to depict the animal in a «lying» position, which is more often used in countermarking, rather than «arched», which is much less common, with graphic effects altogether comparable to the image on Type 2 (fig. 3) in the countermarks found on bronze coinage from the Gades mint, which again is much less widespread than Type 3 (fig. 4), where the animal's body is lying down⁴.



Fig. 2

The coin type chosen for counter-marking, a well-minted Augustan triumviral sesterce, would seem to point toward Sicily as the area where the «dolphin facing right» was punched. We know of a large number of countermarks from this area, nearly all with figurative devices⁵, that repeatedly occur on Augustan triumviral sesterces and dupondii that were minted centrally (found less often) or struck in secondary mints (more common). Our current knowledge is insufficient to identify the latter specimens' place of manufacture with certainty, but it seems realistic to suppose their Sicilian origin, at least for much of the countermarked coinage in circulation⁶.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

The assumed Sicilian provenance of the Augustan sesterce with the punched «dolphin facing right» countermark, though this hypothesis is not yet backed by decisive features, draws our attention once again to the relationship between the island context and the Roman military environment. There can be no doubt that countermarks using the «dolphin» motif, whatever position was chosen by ancient moneyers for the animal portrait, belong to military iconographic heritage, either legionary or, especially, naval contingents. Along with other types, they represent an outright distinctive feature of such coinage⁷.

The direct relation of the «dolphin and trident» Danubian type mentioned above to the Augustan fleet stationed in the area appears fairly certain. The same holds for the simple, punched «dolphin facing right» figure. The marine mammal was closely tied to religious rituals devoted to Neptune, the patron of ships and sailors and emblem of the *legio XI Claudius Pia Fidelis*, as associated with the cult that paid tribute to Apollo, who was used in turn as a symbol of the *legio XV Apollinaris*. The reference to Apollo may also somehow call for the «arched» depiction of the animal's body used for certain countermark types (see above). We recall how, in Homer's telling, this god turned into a dolphin to hop aboard a boat headed for Pylos so as to steer it to Delphi. The mint managers in charge of countermarking may have used the «arched» shape to hark specifically to the mythological episode in which Apollo darted aboard ship.

⁴ ALFARO, 1988: 72.

⁵ MANGANARO, 2005: 265-281; MACALUSO, 1994: 9-380.

⁶ MARTINI, 2017: 240.

⁷ Contra ARÉVALO, 2006.

Although the likely correlation of the punched «dolphin facing right» countermark to the Roman military context, whether legionary or naval, seems fairly sure, its dating remains less certain. Comparison to other figurative types struck around Sicily leads us to theorize a rather recent dating, which Manganaro places during the second half of Tiberius's reign⁸, but I believe we might raise to the time of Claudius (or beyond?)⁹. Finally, if we look to its close iconographic kinship with the two dolphin types documented on Gades bronze (see above), we are forced to treat this series with the same chronological uncertainty over when countermarking took place. Here, too, there appear to be features that point to a post-Augustan dating for the countermarking operation¹⁰.

If the punched countermark's attribution to Sicily or parts thereof were to become consensus, the «dolphin facing right» type would bear further witness to relations between the Sicilian area of influence and Roman military structure. Our current understanding does not allow such relations, though hinted at, to be clearly outlined, let alone unequivocally shown, by the production and distribution of certain types of Sicilian countermarks in the Danube legionary environment.

A further possible bit of evidence for better grasping the relations between the military context and Sicily, perhaps discernible in the triumviral sesterce at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Florence, remains inchoate both due to the specific production technique, punching that might reflect an operation of nearly private nature¹¹, and especially because of the meager sample currently available to us, amounting to the sole specimen noted here.

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⁸ MANGANARO, 2005: *passim*.

⁹ MARTINI, 2017: 246-247.

¹⁰ MARTINI, 2003: 41, n.º 5a; contra ARÉVALO, 2006: 93-95.

¹¹ MARTINI, 2003: 19.