

THE COUNTERMARKS FOUND ON ANCIENT ROMAN COINS: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

by
Richard Baker

During the many years that Rome ruled the Mediterranean World, a number of Roman coins were countermarked by various governing authorities and even by usurpers. The altering of a Roman coin by a countermark, sometimes referred to as a counterstamp, was usually done to change its legal status, its area of circulation or its value. Countermarked coins, therefore, cannot, today, be fully attributed without a knowledge of the purpose of the countermark and the authority who directed its stamping into the metal of the coin.

As one or more of these countermarked coins is almost certain to be encountered by anyone seriously pursuing the field of Roman coinage, it is surprising that there is not at least one comprehensive text available on the subject. Instead, the interested person must turn to the introduction in such general works as *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum* (the most quoted source), *Roman Imperial Coinage*, and to a number of articles and monographs discussing various aspects of the subject or particular groups of countermarks.¹

Because of the need for anyone interested in Roman coinage to know when he or she is observing a countermarked coin, to know the purposes for the use of such marks and to encourage further investigation when such marks are encountered, I have chosen to introduce this subject to my readers in outline form. For this purpose, after a brief introduction, I have listed some of the most interesting and illustrative types of Roman countermarks together with their striking authority and purposes for their use.

The definition of a countermark, has for unknown reasons, been avoided by most writers on the subject. This may have caused some past confusion with such terms as "punched," "counterpunched" and "overstruck." So let us begin by saying, a countermarked coin is one which has had a secondary stamp impressed upon it at sometime subsequent to its original minting.² This countermarking could be done to a relatively new coin or to a coin which had been in circulation for many years.

The coinage of the period of the Roman Republic seldom contains countermarks. There are some sporadic instances of countermarks being placed upon Republican coins still in circulation during the "Empire." By the Empire I refer to that period from 27 B.C. until 476 A.D. when Rome was ruled by a succession of Emperors.

Instead of countermarks the coinage of the Republic often contained bankemarks, also called punchmarks. This term concerns the practice of placing test cuts or "punching" incised letters or emblems upon the surface of a coin by merchants and moneychangers to determine whether a coin was pure metal or plated. They are found primarily on the gold and silver issues.



Figure 1. Obverse of a silver denarius of Augustus from the mint of Lugdunum, circa 2 B.C. - 4 A.D. (possibly later). Diameter 18 mm. Note the "T" punchmark upon neck and jaw.

Roman countermarks as such did not come into use until the introduction of the imperial era by Augustus. There were several reasons why a Roman coin might be countermarked during this period, and various authors give divergent views on the matter. By "pooling" these views one comes up with the three following major categories.

CATEGORY 1 .

To extend the geographical area in which the coin would be accepted as legal tender.

CATEGORY 2 .

To continue in use a coin which had been in circulation for a considerable period of time.

CATEGORY 3 .

To designate a new authority usurping the coins of another for their own use.

Each of these categories has a number of subdivisions, several of which I have designated under each category by capital letters.

1. Harold Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, Vol. I (British Museum, London: 1965), xxxiii-xliii.

Harold Mattingly and E.A. Sydenham, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, Vol. I (Spink & Son, Ltd., London: 1968), pp. 12-15.

2. *Greek and Roman Coins and the Study of History* by J.G. Milne, published by Greenwood Press—(Westport Connecticut: 1971)—Chapter IX, "Countermarks". This is one of the very few references which define a countermark.

CATEGORY 1.

A. Countermarking by imperial authority a coin of the mint of Rome or Lugdunum,³ so it could be used as legal tender in a province by the Roman legions stationed there. The area usually concerned was the German frontier, along the Rhine, during the wars of the first two decades A.D.

Typical Countermarks of Category IA

AVG AVG — Augustus.
 IMP AVG — Emperor Augustus or roughly,
 the emperor Augustus.
 (TIB) [TIB] — Tiberius.



Figure 2. As of Augustus from the mint of Lugdunum, circa 10 B.C. - 5 A.D. Diameter 27 cm. Reverse showing the Altar at Lyons dedicated to Rome and Augustus. Countermarked with (TIB) for Tiberius.

TIB•IM, TIB•IMP, TIB•IMP — Tiberius
 Emperor.
 TIB•AVG — Tiberius Augustus. The name
 "Augustus" originally bestowed as
 a title of honor in 27 B.C. Later became hereditary for all
 male members of the Julio/Claudian family upon their
 accession to the throne.

CAES — Monogram for the name Caesar, not
 Julius Caesar however. Until recently it
 was thought that all use of this monogram referred to
 Germanicus Caesar (died 19 A.D.). It is now generally
 thought to be a title of authority employed by Tiberius
 Caesar.⁴

3. *The Roman Imperial Coinage Volume I*, (London: 1984) Revised edition by C.H.V. Sutherland, Spink & Son Ltd. pp. 27-29. For extensive periods of time during the Julio/Claudian dynasty (27 B.C. - 68 A.D.) the official mint of Rome was assisted by the establishment of an auxiliary mint in the west, generally believed to be the city of Lugdunum, Gaul.

4. *Essays in Roman Coinage presented to Harold Mattingly*, published by Fotokop Wilhelm Weihert K.G. (Germany: 1979) Chapter VII, p. 118-122. "The Behavior of Early Imperial Countermarks" by C.M. Kraay, plate VI.



Figure 3. As of Augustus from the mint of Rome. Struck 7 B.C. by the moneyer P. Lurius Agrippa. 27 cm. diameter. Obverse showing the monogram for the name "CAESAR." Countermarked during the first two decades A.D. for distribution on the German frontier, along the Rhine.


B. Countermarking done in the name of the Roman governor, Legate, proconsul or prefect in charge of a particular province. Whether this was done for officially sanctioned reasons or for personal propaganda is not certain. They generally appear on coins of the first three decades A.D., and should not be confused with Category 3A.

Typical Countermarks of Category 1B.

GAL — Possibly C. Galerius, prefect of Egypt
 in 19 A.D. under Tiberius.
 AR, ARON, ARONI — L. Apronius,
 proconsul of Africa in 20 A.D.⁵
 YR, YR — Monogram for P. Quinctilius
 Varus, Governor of Germany in 9
 A.D. under Augustus. Varus was a distant relation of
 Augustus and had served with great distinction as Gov-
 ernor of Syria. In 9 A.D. due to his under estimating his
 enemy he was ambushed and destroyed along with his
 entire command of Legions XVII, XVIII, and XVIII in
 the Teutoberg Forests of Germany. Over 15,000 men
 perished. The numbers XVII, XVIII and XVIII were
 never again to be used by Roman Legions. It was to be
 Augustus' greatest military defeat.



Figure 4. As of Augustus from the mint of Lugdunum. 27 cm. diameter. Altar Reverse. YR monogram for P. Quinctilius Varus. Countermarked circa 9 A.D. for use by the Legions stationed in Germany.

 — Monogram for Germanicus, commander of the Legions in Germany from A.D. 14-16 under his adoptive father, Tiberius.

C. Countermarking local “provincial imitations” of Roman coinage to give official sanction to them by the government of Rome, or its legal representatives. These imitations are usually Gallic, Hispanic or British in origin and are most frequently copies of the coins of Augustus, Tiberius and especially Claudius.

Typical Countermarks of Category 1C.

PRO — Probatus, meaning “approved,”
PROB — Local variant of above, peculiar to Britain.
PRO MP — Probavit, Imperator. Two separate countermarks combined on one coin to produce the statement, “with Imperial Approval.”



Figure 5. (2 photos - Obverse & Reverse of Same Coin) Gallic imitation of a sestertius of Claudius, circa 41-65 A.D. 35 cm. diameter. Obverse shows the **PROB** countermark for “PROBATUS.” Reverse shows the partial flattening of the coin due to the force of the countermark. The full reverse legend, in four lines should read: **EXSC / OB / CIVES / SERVATOS**.



Figure 6. Another Gallic imitation of a sestertius of Claudius. 35 cm. diameter. Obverse shows the use of two different countermarks. The first, **PRO** (for Probatus) is here combined with **MP** (for Imperator) to form the saying “Probavit Imperator.”

5. Mentioned on numerous occasions in Tacitus *The Annals* published by the Everyman's Library (New York: 1922).

BON — **BONUS**, meaning “good.” Another variant similar to probatus.

TIA — Tiberius Augustus (Tiberius Claudius Drusus) i.e. the Emperor Claudius.

Struck mainly upon provincial imitations of sestertii of Tiberius, Caligula and of Claudius himself.



Figure 7. (2 photos - Obverse & Reverse of same coin) Dupondius of Antonia, the mother of Claudius. Struck circa 41-54 A.D. possible colonial imitation of official Roman issue. 32 cm. diameter. Obverse shows the countermark **BON**, which is the abbreviation of “**BONUS**,” meaning “good.” Reverse showing the usual flat area caused by countermarking.

CATEGORY 2.

A. The coins in this category are usually in a worn condition. In this condition countermarking served to downgrade the value originally placed upon it.

Typical Countermarks of Category 2A.

DVP — Dupondius, struck upon worn specimens of sestertii and downgrading their value by half.

AS — As. Struck upon worn specimens of dupondii and downgrading their value by half.⁶

B. This would include countermarking the coins of one's predecessors still in circulation to give them a “fresh” guarantee. One reason this was considered necessary was because the office of emperor and of the imperial majesty was still a relatively new institution in the Rome of the first century A.D. Legally it rested upon shaky ground. Although the Senate of Rome abandoned the Republic by relinquishing supreme power to Augustus, it still technically was not an hereditary office. The first emperors of Rome found it necessary to remind the populace of their authority while at the same time creating a visual link with their predecessors. By countermarking the coins of their predecessors they saved the time and expense of minting new coins while still conveying the all important message—namely who controlled the power.

Typical Countermarks of Category 2B.

6. *Essays in Roman Coinage Presented to Harold Mattingly*, Plate VI, No. 7 and 8.



Figure 8. (2 Photos - 2 obverses of different coins) Sestertius of Claudius from the mint of Rome circa 42-54 A.D. Obverse shows the NCAPR countermark of Nero. Also pictured is a dupondius of Antonia from the mint of Rome, likewise showing an NCAPR countermark.

NCAPR — Here we have the commonest of all the early Imperial countermarks. However, not all the authorities agree on what the letters mean. It was struck upon the base metal coinage during the first eight to ten years of Nero's reign when only gold and silver was minted in his name from the mint of Rome. Speculation as to why it was used and what its translation is varies according to which theory one adheres to.

These are the two most common translations:

1. Nero Claudius Augustus Probavit. Roughly, "with the approval of Nero Claudius, the Augustus."
2. Nero Claudius Augustus Populo Romano. Roughly, "from Nero Claudius, the Augustus, to the people of Rome."

In the first case it is the revalidation of the coins of Nero's three immediate predecessors (Tiberius, Caligula and Claudius).

But in the second instance it is a "congiarium," or public dole given by Nero sometime after his succession to the throne. Originally in the form of wine or grain it later developed into the custom of monetary donations given by the emperors to the populace of Rome.

Since the greater majority of those specimens found to date are from either the mint of Rome or Lugdunum, and also show very little wear to necessitate countermarking, I hold with the second of the two translations.

CATEGORY 3.

A. In times of revolution the names, monograms, or mottos of revolting generals and legions were countermarked by their adherents upon the available coinage. Quite frequently this was done upon the coinage with the portrait and titles of the emperor the revolution was against. For all practical purposes this category refers to the revolt of A.D. 68/69 against the emperor Nero and his immediate successors. Within that short time span Rome was to witness five Augusti in rapid succession. All of them claiming the imperial authority; only the last, Vespasian was able to hold it.

Typical Countermarks of Category 3A.

PR — Populus Romanus — The Roman People. This countermark was used by the rebels in Gaul under the leadership of Julius Vindex during the months of March through June of A.D. 68. Used mostly upon dupondii and Asses.



Figure 9. Obverse of a very worn colonial piece of Nero from Antioch, circa 65-68 A.D. Note that the PR countermark has been struck deliberately across the features of Nero, to deface his image.

SPQR — Senatus Populusque Romanus... The Senate and people of Rome. Same as for PR. Both were generally struck across the portrait (if on a coin of Nero) so as to disfigure it. By the use of this countermark Vindex was not disavowing his loyalty to Rome and its Senate, but to the contrary. It was only a repudiation of allegiance to the Emperor Nero, calling upon both the senate and people of Rome to name a worthy replacement as Emperor.

ΓΑΛΒΑ — Greek lettering for the name Galba. Issued in lower Moesia upon the unorthodox (colonial imitation) sestertii, dupondii and asses of Nero. Used from April until about mid July, A.D. 68. Like the countermarks of Vindex, it was struck across the portrait to disfigure it as much as possible.

ΟΘΟΙΜΡ ΟΘΟ•ΙΜΡ — Monogram for OTHO IMPERATOR. Used from January until early April A.D. 68.

VE — VITE monogram for Vitellius. Used from January until early April A.D. 68. Struck upon the sestertii from the mint of Lugdunum as well as upon unorthodox Gallic issues.



Figure 10. Republican silver Denarius of L. FLAMINIUS CHILO struck circa 106-105 B.C. The obverse has been countermarked by the adherents of Vespasian (circa 69/70 A.D.) with the motto **MP•VES** for "Imperator Vespasian." This countermark was placed upon the coin 175 years after its original minting! This gives some indication as to the life span of particular coin denominations.

MP VES — Imperator Vespasian. Used by the followers of Vespasian at Antioch, upon Cistophoric silver pieces⁷ and upon old Republican denarii.⁸ June until July(?) A.D. 69.

ES A — VESPA monogram for Vespasian. Used on dupondii and AS of Nero from the mint of Lugdunum. From June until possibly December A.D. 69



Figure 11. As of Nero from the mint of Lugdunum struck between 66 and 68 A.D. Obverse shows the ES A (VESPA) monogram countermark for Vespasian used in 69/70 A.D. It usually appears only on coins from this mint.

It is worth noting here that only upon the coins countermarked by the followers of Vindex or Galba did they strike upon the features of Nero deliberately to deface his portrait. This was because both Vindex and Galba were in revolt against Nero, whereas when Otho, Vitellius and Vespasian revolted, Nero was already dead. Ostensibly these last three named were not in revolt against Nero, only against his hated "usurpers" of power. By pairing their monograms next to the still visible portrait of Nero they were in effect trying to create that "visual" link with the legitimate, but now extinct, Julio/Claudian dynasty.

I would like to include here two unusual legionary countermarks which because of the coins they appear upon as well as their content, are linked to both the Category 3A above as well as the following Category 3B. They are:

X̄ X̄ — Roman numeral ten with a bar across the top or bottom. Struck for the Legion X Gemina, stationed in Pannonia. It was upon coins of Nero from the mint of Lugdunum, but only after Nero's death. The Legion took no active part in the revolt of A.D. 68. In July of that year they were reassigned to the province of Spain by the Emperor Galba and took no active part in the struggles for power which followed. The stamp was used sometime within the year A.D. 68/69.

7. *The Cistophori of Hadrian* by W. Metcalf (New York: 1981) published by the American Numismatic Society, p. 17 #76a and plate 5.

8. *Roman Coins and their Values* by D. Sear (London: 1981) 3rd Revised Edition by Seaby Publications LTD., p. 42 paragraph 4.



Figure 12. As of Nero from the mint of Lugdunum, struck circa 66 to 68 A.D. Obverse showing the X countermark which stands for the Legion X, GEMINA, which was stationed in Pannonia during the revolt against and subsequent overthrow of Nero. It was probably employed during 68/69 A.D.



— Club of Hercules(?) suspended above LVI which most likely stood for Legion VI, Victrix, from Spain which was the personal legion of Galba and was the first to declare for him. It has been found on several Gallic imitation sestertii of Claudius, as well as upon several other types. It may have originally been used to advertise the cause of Galba, but since the majority of the coins apparently available at the time were of the Emperor Claudius they were not defaced as were the coins with Nero's portrait.



Figure 13. Another Gallic imitation of a sestertius of Claudius, struck circa 41-65 A.D. Obverse shows the unusual countermark. It probably stands for the Legion VI, Victrix from Spain.



B. Marking the "Local Colonial" coins of the provinces in which the Roman Legions were stationed with "official" Roman countermarks or with semi-official "Legionary" countermarks. This was done in order to convert them into legal tender for use by the legion stationed in each particular area.

Typical Countermarks of Category 3B.

X, XF, LXF — Legion X, Fretensis. Found primarily upon the local coinage of Judaea & Samaria. They

are primarily connected with the Jewish wars of A.D. 66-73 and the following Roman occupation. There are several other well known countermarks connected with this legion. They are probably the most widely sought after legionary countermarks because of their historic interest of the tenth legion to collectors of both Jewish and Roman coins.⁹



Figure 14. Colonial coin of Domitian from Syria, circa 70-96 A.D. Reverse shows two countermarks. The top one is struck vertically and represents a Roman galley with oars, sailing to the right. The larger countermark shows a wild boar with a dolphin beneath, and the letters L•X•F above. The letters stand for the Legion X, Fretensis. The galley and the dolphin both allude to the famous naval battle of 36 B.C. where the Tenth Legion under Agrippa destroyed the forces of Gnaeus Pompey off the Coast of Sicily. The nickname Fretensis is taken from "Fretum Siculum," which loosely translates to the Straits of Sicily, which were located off the Cape of Naulocus, where the naval engagement occurred.



— This is one of the commonest of all Roman countermarks, either an oval or a square with a laureated head within, usually facing to the right. The head is generally intended to bear the features of the reigning emperor, but in most cases is too small to accurately identify. It is almost always found on the colonial coinage of the Roman Empire. Very old and worn coins, or coins bearing the features of recently deceased imperial family members are most frequently countermarked.



Figure 15. Colonial coin of Maximus as Caesar, struck between 235 and 238 A.D. Obverse countermarked with a small laureated head of Gordian III (238 to 244 A.D.).

9. *Ancient Jewish Coinage — Vol. II: Herod the Great through Bar Cochba* by Ya'akov Meshorer-Amphora Books (New York: 1982) Page 94, Page 196, Page 233, and plates.

C. The reverses of coins of Category 3B. Here the "official" coinage of Rome or its officially sanctioned colonial coinage has been countermarked by various "colonial" cities in order to appropriate the coinage for local use.

Typical Countermarks of Category 3C.



— Radiate head of the god Helios(?) struck upon official sestertii of Rome of the early empire. Generally believed to have been applied in the eastern portion of the empire.



Figure 16. "Senatorial" Sestertius struck for Augustus in 16 B.C. by the moneyer C. ASINIUS GALLUS, struck at the mint of Rome. Reverse shows two countermarks of a radiate head of Helios, a Syrian deity akin to the Roman Apollo.

D, DD, D[✠]D — Decreto Decurionum . . . by decree of the town Decuria (or Council). Quite often found upon the "as" of Nemausus of Augustus and Agrippa, as well as upon Tiberian coinage.



TVR monogram for the city of Turiaso, Spain.

D. Roman "colonial" coins with "colonial denominational" countermarks in the form of letters of the Greek alphabet. These letters were placed upon the bronze issues of various cities in the Roman East, as marks of revaluation during the periods of financial instability in the middle to late second century A.D.

Typical Countermarks of Category 3D.

- B mark of value of 2.
- Δ mark of value of 4.
- E mark of value of 5.
- H mark of value of 8.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES CONTAINING COUNTERMARKS

Coinage in Roman Imperial Policy 31 B.C. - A.D. 68 by C.H.V. Sutherland (London: 1971) - published by Barnes & Noble, Inc. and Methuen & Co. Ltd., pages 69-70 and footnote.

The Numismatic Chronicle - Vol. XX - published by the Royal Numismatic Society (London: 1960) Chapter 7, "Two Roman Countermarks of A.D. 68" by D.W. MacDowall - plate VII.

The American Numismatic Society Museum Notes #16 - published by the American Numismatic Society - New York 1970, pages 57-68, "Observation on the Behavior of Tiberian Counterstamps" by Theodore V. Buttrey, Jr.

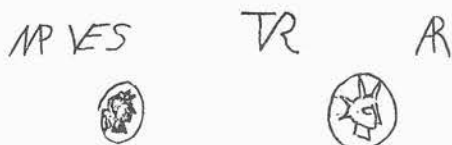
The Numismatist, Volume 87, No. 11 and 12 and Volume 88, No. 1 (Nov., Dec. 1974 and Jan. 1975) published by the American Numismatic Association - "The Ancient Countermarks" by Gregory G. Brunk.

The major portion of the countermarks appearing in this article may be found in *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum (BMC)* Volume I, Pages xxviii through xliii. Many appear in several of the previously quoted references.

Essays in Roman Coinages presented to Harold Mattingly Pages 113-136, lists most of the countermarks appearing in BMC including the following which appear in this article.



"Ancient Countermarks" by Gregory G. Brunk listed above served as source for the following.



The *Numismatic Chronicle* Vol. XX was the source of the following two countermarks from A.D. 68.



I hope this brief introduction into Roman countermarks has succeeded in its purpose of giving the reader sufficient interest in countermarks, to encourage further research on the subject. I also hope one of our readers will be inspired to bring together, correlate and update the existing written material and write the sorely needed comprehensive text covering this most interesting subject. To do so will do much to bring it into its proper position of importance in the study of Rome and its coinage.

I wish to extend my thanks to Mr. John Donald for taking the photographs used in the article.

BEARDED EMPERORS

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Although it is hard to say why styles held sway, it appears that, at least in the late empire, a clean-shaven face is associated with a courtly life and that rough, short beards were preferred by the military. Long beards indicate a philosophical or religious inclination.

Thus, during the first 400 years of the empire, one can discern three major periods in the treatment of facial hair. The first (unbearded) lasts through Trajan. The second (bearded) begins with Hadrian (117 A.D.) and lasts through the period of the tetrarchy (early 4th century). The third (again clean-shaven) begins with Constantine and lasts until the fifth century. Each period has its minor exceptions and the goatee sometimes found on Trajan Decius and the mustache of Constantine are unusual deviations from the Roman norm. A final period, in which some emperors have full beards and some are either clean-shaven or with short military beards, concludes Roman imperial coinage.

Acknowledgement. I would like to thank Harlan J. Berk for providing some of the photographs used to illustrate this article.



ANOTHER COUNTERFEITER EXPOSED

THE CAPRARA FORGERIES by Philip Kinns was very recently published jointly by the Royal Numismatic Society and the International Association of Professional Numismatists.

This hard cover book contains fifty nine pages of text and catalogue plus seven plates illustrating 84 Greek coin types and hybrids known to have come from the dies of Caprara. Plate eight illustrates 13 types of small Greek coins manufactured on the Aegean island of Syros before 1832, which are most probably from his dies.

Caprara (first name unknown) was a contemporary of Carl Wilhelm Becker. The products of each were first exposed by the Italian scholar Domenic Sestini in 1826 with the publication of his limited edition book, *Sopra i moderni falsificatori*, which has been largely ignored until recently and was thought by many to be obsolete.

Many of Caprara's coins are now in forgery collections in the major museums, but a large number are also illustrated in recent sale catalogs of well known dealers, where they have been sold as genuine. A detailed report of this important new book, and some of the coins under consideration will appear in the next issue of *SAN*.

Fellows of the Royal Numismatic Society may obtain the book from RNS. Retail price £18.75. The book should also be available from dealers who are members of the International Association of Professional Numismatists.

