



Argentum Romanorum sive Barbarorum

Permanences et évolution des usages monétaires
de l'argent du IV^e au VI^e siècle dans l'Occident romain

Tradition und Entwicklung im Gebrauch des Silbergeldes
im römischen Westen (4.-6. Jh.)



Three metals, but no trimetallism. The status of silver coinage in Late Antiquity and its names

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It is a widespread opinion that silver coinage played a very minor role in the monetary system(s) of Late Antiquity. This bases mostly on the fact that indications of values and prices are generally not indicated in this metal, which had played such a dominant role in the Republic and in the Principate, and that the *de rebus bellicis*, in his famous suggestions for a reform of the imperial coinage does not seem to consider silver at all. In general, the widespread idea of a Late Antique society characterized by the existence of only two, always more distant groups, the “very rich” and the “very poor” implied also a connection of the former with gold, the latter with divisional, and distracted thus from silver. Still, silver coinage went on being minted, and silver coins go on appearing in hoards and from archaeological excavations. The lack of a thorough understanding of their value and status, though, has also caused big problems in literature: to such coins have been assigned names known from Late Antique sources, most famously *siliqua*, which in Antiquity did not indicate them; in a circular fashion, then, these words have been re-read in the ancient texts and believed to refer to the silver coins. Consequences are the continuous strengthening of a circular argument, and the erroneous interpretation of ancient sources, which conspires to further hinder a correct interpretation of the role of silver in the Late Antique monetary system(s). It is the aim of this paper to reopen the question of silver coinage and its names in Late Antiquity. Starting from the assumption that gold and divisional were not connected in a bimetallic system, but rather represented two different, and parallel, monetary systems (Carlà 2009), it will be shown how silver never acquired in Late Antiquity an autonomous status, as constituting a “third parallel system”, but was at different stages anchored either to the gold or to the divisional system. This caused shifting values for the silver currency, but also a shifting status between a nominal and an intrinsic value. In this context, it will be shown, silver coins did not have clear names identifying one specific coin and its value, as it had been the case for instance with *denarius* in the Republic and in the Principate. In particular, it will be shown that the name *siliqua* does not identify any silver coin, and should therefore be abandoned in numismatic practice as misleading.

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