

# NUMISMATICA PANNONICA

ANTIQUÉ NUMISMATIC WORKSHOP  
CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

2018



ACTA NUMISMATICA HUNGARICA  
SUPPLEMENTUM I

# NUMISMATICA PANNONICA

## I

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# NUMISMATICA PANNONICA I

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# Modern counterfeit techniques of Roman coins

## – with own examples –

BALÁZS CSÁTI

*The ever-expanding demand of the collectors society can only partially be satisfied by the old collections and the newly discovered coins, therefore the more and more effort is put into counterfeiting throughout the world. Because the collectors' skills and qualifications differ greatly, thus the primitive copies can also be sold, as well as the more elaborately produced ones. Often they even appear in the lots of the most renowned auctions houses. They make their way into collections, and later appear again mixed together with original ones on the market. Then either they are considered them as known fakes, or they can also be sold to an enthusiastic novice at a fair or on the internet. Besides there is also a risk that they end up in public collections as donations, and they are published by passionate students working on their BA or MA thesis. It is also common amongst smugglers, therefore the experts examining these pieces also need to have a knowledge of this field. The crossing of borders with copied coins is not illegal in most European countries, but it is with original ones. I will list some cases from recent years together with the most common production techniques that caught my attention, when hunting for new pieces for my collection. With this paper I only intend to direct the attention to these counterfeiting practices, as I am sure it is not in the interest of the auction houses to sell fake coins, but mistakes can occur, since the auctions are organised by humans.*

Frequently, the question arises in collector circles: „where or from whom to buy Roman coins, where are they going to get genuine pieces from?” The answer is instantly: „buy from a renowned auction house!”. Indeed, it can be expected that these auction houses are operated by professionals who have spent their free time with numismatics themselves since their childhood, and that knowledge is at their „fingertips” or they inherited the knowledge from their ancestors. It is rightfully assumed that the employees are also reliable and skilled people, trusted by the CEO, thus they also examined and valued the coins put up for auction. I am not familiar with the mechanism and I also assume that the scheme is not the same everywhere, but by the time a coin is sold, more people have viewed it at the company, so it is almost impossible not to spot modern forgeries. Such a mistake can diminish the confidence in the auction house and can cause serious financial loss for the future together with a guaranteed loss of prestige. Since real people work in these companies, there is a potential to make mistakes. In fact, almost all auction houses listed fake coins even just in the last 5 years. Actually, I consider the prestige of the auction house no longer to be determined by which one has not put up problematic coins for auction, but where their proportion was the smallest.

There are several types of modern counterfeits from a technical point of view that, besides the pressing process, were known to and often employed by the Romans in antiquity e.g. the *limes falsa* and contemporary barbarian imitations. Giovanni da Cavino (1500–1570) a

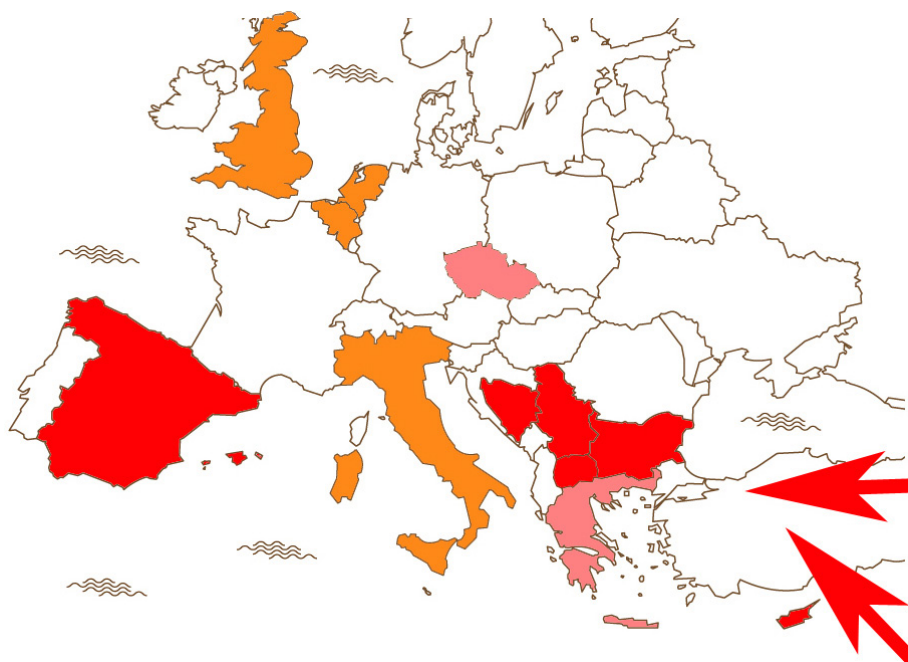


Paduan engraver and masterful creator of Roman great bronze coins or Carl Wilhelm Becker (1772–1830), who made different Roman coin types imitations in high quality. Nowadays these are sought-after, rare coins that themselves have already been falsified. A special group of modern counterfeits is a group of fantasy coins that try to imitate Roman coins (*Fig. 1*) that never actually existed in antiquity. Another variety is when they create a coin from non-matching obverses and reverses, these cannot even be called hybrids. In fact, they cannot be regarded as modern counterfeits in a numismatic sense, since they are easily spotted and not suitable for deception.



*Fig. 1 Modern fantasy coin (Hungarian National Museum, photo by the author)*

When talking about counterfeiting today, China is often mentioned. Well, indeed, there are coins that can be traced back to Chinese origin on the market, but most of the fakes are still of European origin. There are traditional, almost industry-oriented areas and there are emerging ones. With the help of the internet and the postal services these counterfeits arrive after a few days, e.g. from the Balkans to Great Britain, followed by the distribution from England provides an authentic background. Even this is unnecessary if e.g. the seller is located in the Netherlands, but oddly – although not surprisingly – enough the coin comes from Bulgaria. There is no country from which only modern counterfeits would come onto the market, but there are some areas that have a remarkably high proportion of them, and there are no exceptions to fake antiquities. Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cyprus, Spain and some countries in the Middle East are front-runners with Israel and indirectly Turkey as a transit country. There is a well-known workshop in the Czech Republic and a tourist service in Greece. Most of the modern counterfeits, using the lawfulness of the law, come from the UK from second hand, because of the various prohibitive laws in Italy and – for reasons unknown to me – from the Netherlands and Belgium. Depending on the number of collectors counterfeit coins are put up for sale virtually everywhere in Europe and even overseas (*Fig. 2*).



*Fig. 2. Countries with a considerable proportion of counterfeit coins*

The most of general used phrases about modern forgeries<sup>1</sup>

*copy*: to produce something so that it is the same as an original piece of work.

*fake*: an object that is made to look real or valuable in order deceive people.

A synonym of it is:

*counterfeit*: made the look like the original of something, usually for dishonest or illegal purposes.

*forgery*: an illegal copy of a document, painting, etc., or the crime of making such copies.

Modern counterfeiting techniques<sup>2</sup>

- I. Modern counterfeit coins made using traditional striking techniques
- II. Modern counterfeits pressed with a cast die
- III. Coin replicas made using casting process
- IV. Galvanoplasty method
- V. Processed by manual engraving of genuine coin cores

#### *I. Modern counterfeits made using traditional striking techniques*

Counterfeits made with an engraved die regularly appear. Some of these can easily be purchased from the “creators” in their online stores, but they are distributed on the market more cautiously, thus they occasionally make their way to the auction houses. A good example is the relatively rare antoninian of Nigrinian, which is worked out (abraded, damaged, patinated, corroded etc.), often using a silvered antoninian as raw material, which is cheaper. The potential buyer is already eagerly uncertain, almost believing that he is facing a new type and is generally ashamed that he has not known it previously. However, the disorder is conspicuous for those who are properly familiar with the Roman style. In the autumn of 2016, after a few days of hesitation and external encouragement, I bought a Nigrinian antoninian (RIC 472) on eBay (*Fig. 3*).

It was quite impressive on picture, but the portrait was too rigid, with anatomical features, which do not resemble that of a child, although compared to the tender age of Nigrinian is only known from his childhood portraits. On the reverse, the tip of the eagle’s wing are pointed at the letter O on the right side of legend. My suspicion was further raised by the fact that the seller, who was located in the Netherlands, provided a tracking number ending with BG. This would not be a big problem, but when the suspicions are confirmed from several sources, one has to think seriously about it. I was trying to find some exact references and I was very fond of it for the first time, because this type was also featured at Numizmatik Lanz<sup>3</sup>, which even seemed to be from the same die. However, later seeing that it was withdrawn from the auction, only confirmed my suspicion.



*Fig. 3 (The author’s property and photo)*

1 <https://dictionary.cambridge.org> (12. April 2019)

2 Cf. PROKOPOV-MANOV 2005, 6.

3 Numizmatik Lanz, Auction 153, lot 571. (12. December 2011)

I searched further and several other pieces appeared: in 2013 at [Gerhard Hirsch](#)<sup>4</sup>, in 2014 a new silvered piece at [Gerhard Hirsch](#)<sup>5</sup>, in 2015 [Auktionshaus Christoph Gärtner](#)<sup>6</sup> a masked, damaged specimen and even in 2017 a further one appeared at [Auktionshaus Felzmann](#)<sup>7</sup>. However, in the latter case, the fraud was noticed and withdrawn from the auction in time. At the time the article is released, you can bid for one at [Gerhard Hirsch](#), which was not sold at previous [auction](#)<sup>8</sup> in 2016.

The Nigrinian frenzy is not over yet! In September 2016, a completely unknown struck Nigrinian antoninian appeared; a version never auctioned, nor published before. It was also absent from the popular lists of counterfeits most likely because it has not been in the sight of collectors and critics. What makes it interesting is that one was introduced in September at [Hirsch auction](#)<sup>9</sup>, and another in December at [Lanz auction](#)<sup>10</sup>, so it ran at two places in a relatively short time, with a brownish, suspiciously patinated surface, on which one had some unusual green dirt. If the surface is raised, the coin image leaves something to be desired if it is compared with well-known, authentic pieces. In this version, the creator pays more attention to the eagle's backside on the reverse, but the obverse portrait still does not show the delicate outlines of a child. In any case, it is interesting to note that known counterfeits can easily be filtered out, but new ones may be so unusual as not only to trick someone to put it up for auction, but also not to withdraw it despite several weeks being available for it.

In September 2017, a colleague of mine drew my attention to a RIC IV 21A Geta denarius running at the [Classical Numismatic Group](#)<sup>11</sup>, which, according to him, was extremely strange. It had a round head, and the face of Spes on the reverse was too thoughtful. In this case, we can only rely on our senses and on the style, because the coin was struck, thus it is hard to criticise from a technical point of view. Many people on the community fora tried to refute our arguments



Fig. 4 (E-bay.com)

for various reasons, but in the meantime CNG has withdrawn the item from the auction, so it was not sold. I do not know what other scientific explanations could support their decision in addition to the style analysis of the coin image, but I think they have decided wisely. One tries look for a coin made from the same die among the completed sales, and soon I came upon two that were found in documented, traceable circumstances. One piece was sold at [Martí Hervera's auction](#)<sup>12</sup> in 2014 and the other one at [Roma Numismatics Limited](#)<sup>13</sup> in 2016. If something is too good to be true, it often is. It is unnecessary to distinguish between a coin pressed on an original flan or a forgery new struck on a new flan, as the intention and the purpose is the same. Furthermore with patinasation the original flan's features can somewhat be reproduced. This piece was also produced on a simple flan. (Fig. 4).

4 Gerhard Hirsch Nachfolger, Auction 289, lot 1072. (2–3. May 2013)

5 Gerhard Hirsch Nachfolger, Auction 303, lot 3222. (25. September 2014)

6 Auktionshaus Christoph Gärtner, Auction 31, lot 28084. (20. June 2015)

7 Auktionshaus Felzmann, Auction 159, lot 1096. (4–5. July 2017)

8 Gerhard Hirsch Nachfolger, Auction 317, lot 2421. (18 February 2016)

9 Gerhard Hirsch Nachfolger, Auction 323, lot 2610. (22 September 2016))

10 Numizmatik Lanz, Auction 163, lot 454. (7 December 2016)

11 Classical Numismatic Group, Auction 406, lot 734. (27 September 2017)

12 Martí Hervera, Auction 83, lot 3487. (16 October 2014)

13 Roma Numismatics Ltd. Auction E-sale 26, lot 826. (30 April 2016)



The most important flaws of the traditional striking technique are:

- stylistic problems, rigid representation
- reinterpretations, erroneous legends
- striving for centrality
- poorly prepared or brittle flan
- patina problems (not natural)
- earth trace problems (not natural)

*II. Modern counterfeits pressed (with ball press?) with cast dies, not struck (to protect the weak probably cast bronze dies)*

The technical development by the end of the 20th century made it possible not only to make precise negative copies for casting, but also to eliminate the anomalies associated with casting e.g. bubbles and edge problems.<sup>14</sup> During this process, the coin is not reproduced directly, but the pair of dies are. Afterwards they use these dies to cautiously press new coins, mostly silver and gold. These secondary dies are usually cast from bronze. By choosing a suitable mould material, the 1.3-1.6 percent<sup>15</sup> shrinkage due to bronze casting can be minimized. Without correction, the diameter of the medal's image (on the die and on the prepared fake coin) can be reduced to 18.7 mm at a 19 mm silver denarius, which is not a remarkably large difference. Of course, this copying process also has its flaws. For example, it copies the original coin's defects, the edge of the original will appear on the new coin's edge, and a splice may appear as a secondary indentation. It is unnecessary to distinguish between a genuine or a modern flan – similarly to the traditional striking technique – because the intention and the purpose is the same (Fig. 5). Alarmingly deceptive fresh striking radiuses appear on the counterfeit, which is not characteristic of the direct cast coins. If the original coins was worn these abrasions will also appears on the fake coin near fresh striking rays (Fig. 6). Probably the best fakes are made with this technique, if studios make negative images of perfect grade or at least extremely fine grade coins. I think the manufacturers will prefer this method in the future and the expert numismatists will more often have a hard time discerning them from the originals.



Fig. 5  
(ForumAncientCoins.com)



Fig. 6  
(ForumAncientCoins.com)

14 NÉMETH forth, 15–18. [http://www.sasovits.hu/cnc/irodalom/ontesztet\\_kezirat\\_04.12.pdf](http://www.sasovits.hu/cnc/irodalom/ontesztet_kezirat_04.12.pdf) (29. January 2019)

15 NÉMETH forth, 60. [http://www.sasovits.hu/cnc/irodalom/ontesztet\\_kezirat\\_04.12.pdf](http://www.sasovits.hu/cnc/irodalom/ontesztet_kezirat_04.12.pdf) (29. January 2019)

The most important flaws of modern counterfeits pressed with cast dies:

- faithfully copies the original coin's features while new, sensitive striking rays appear
- copies the damages of the original coin or attempts to eliminate it on the dies or the finished coin
- a fresh sleek crack on the genuine, patinated flan
- material is not authentic

### III. Coin replicas made using casting process

From time to time, collectors try to be on the safe side by purchasing coins that seem to have been dug up from the ground and try to clean them themselves, thus being able to achieve a considerable or at least a moderate profit. This area was also discovered by counterfeiters, who produce cast fakes and afterwards put some earth on it, to make it look more authentic. This complicated and costly procedure is obviously not worth it for common 4<sup>th</sup> century AD small bronze coins, but it is more alluring for rarer or larger coins. Probably this method is the most popular way to delude the collectors. No engraving skills or numismatic knowledge is necessary, it is enough to possess a melting furnace, good shaping material, authentic metal and some genuine coins as samples.

The following example shows that the “cleaned” version of a coin with earth traces on has recently been sold at a private internet auction, and was already offered again on the bid list (Fig. 7). It was a fortunate case, because the dirty pieces would have been suspicious for a well-prepared collector at the time when he received it. If the edge does not provide enough information, then luckily, only the cleaning will reveal that the coin is not genuine. The patination can be done by chemical means, the “cleaned” version clearly shows that the surface was painted and dirt, lint stuck to the coat of paint, the air bubbles introduced into the paint did not appear until drying. In case of a single-layer patinated piece – like the untreated coin shown in the picture (Fig. 8) – after a relatively short wear, the metal is shining without any colour transition. This phenomenon also occurs on coins that have been found in hoards, but not on scattered finds that are in direct contact with the ground for centuries. Dirt cover does not confirm the genuineness of the coin, it only blurs the picture in such cases.



Fig. 7 (Ebay.com)

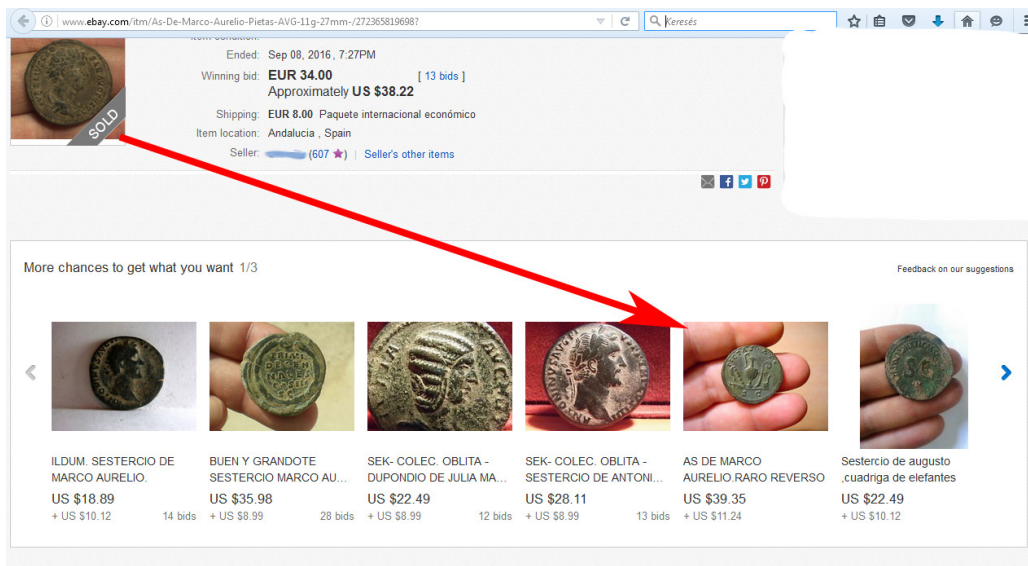


Fig. 8 (Ebay.com)

The most important problems with cast coins:

- matching line on the rim
- overflow line on the edge
- bumpy or grooved rim or traces of grating and grinding
- air bubbles
- uneven planes
- positive smear, bumps, metal chips
- internal casting channels (rupture of negative pattern)
- relatively dull striking rays
- patina problems (not natural)
- dirt cover problems (not natural)
- same coin contour for each produced piece

#### IV. Galvanoplasty method

Galvanoplasty is a procedure primarily employed in restorers practice.<sup>16</sup> Problems similar to the casting process may appear on the surface of the coin, or traces of striving for the defect. A further disadvantage is that the coin can only be formed from elemental metals, not from alloys. Coins made with this method are rarely encountered in commerce. I have no direct experience with coins made using this method.

#### V. Processed by manual re-engraving of genuine coin cores

A method only employed for the improvement of the grade. It surpasses the limits of ethical cleaning of the original unearthed coins or the explanatory exploration (unpacking of corrosion). From the varying thickness of the patina layer to the rough overlapping, the interval in which the counterfeiters are engaged can be measured until the metal is tooled,

<sup>16</sup> BRUDER 2010, 85–91.



Fig. 9 (*ForumAncientCoins.com*)

engraved deeply. The monotonous horizontal and vertical machining is a striking problem, for example, the togas are often crocheted and folded at the same height. The distances of the contours are minimally shifted, thus a completely different portrait is created compared to the original Roman versions. Because of the takeover – if it is partial – the coin is patinated again (*Fig. 9*). The edge of the coin is not affected by the chisel, so there is a rather convincing surface there. The possibility of falling off is equivalent to the extent of the intervention. In case of uncertainty, the examination of the patina's composition may help, but also note that the coin may have been re-patinated with an untreated patina. The ones I encountered were sold on a private level, mostly at a fixed price. It seems to me that this problem has also arisen in auction house trade and is a frequent forum topic on the internet.<sup>17</sup> There is no specialized literature on this subject, no known workshops, because it is actually the manufacturing of a unique coin, not a reproduction method (*Fig. 10*).



Fig. 10 (*ForumAncientCoins.com*)

Can procedures be combined? Yes, they can. For example, a cast coin needs some additional work done by tools. Maybe because the cast procedure was unsuccessful, the contours were not sharp enough, or some mistakes need to be covered up. These are the tooled cast fake coins (*Fig. 11*).



Fig. 11 (*ForumAncientCoins.com*)

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.cointalk.com/threads/thoughts-on-this-sestertius.263842/> (29. January 2019)



### Summary

Although modern forgeries of the Roman coins have rather specific manufacturing techniques, we do not pay enough attention to them. Probably all of them will still be in use in the future for various reasons. First of all, there is the difference in collectors' skills and knowledge, thus there will always be someone, a novice for example, who will be content to get hold of a rare or even unique piece, not even paying attention the low quality of this fake coin, as he does not comprehend why this coin was so reasonably priced. However, there is also another human factor to it, since who does not like a great bargain? Bidding is a race with a certain rush to it, therefore the urge of winning will always play an important role at auctions. This is evident to all: the sellers, the buyers and of course also to the forgers. This article was purely motivated by trying to help fellow collectors and experts notice some of the peculiarities and tricks counterfeiters employ to deceive us.

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