Review Essay: P. J. Casey, *Understanding Ancient Coins*

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In *Understanding Ancient Coins*, P. J. Casey attempts “to bring to the attention of archaeologists and historians something of the full potential of coin evidence ... and expose some of the techniques of study which have been developed” therein (7). Throughout the work he stresses the need to understand the processes which underlie the issue, use, and loss of coins in order to extract evidential value from the surviving specimens. Though his primary interest is in the Roman period, Casey balances the text with numerous examples from Byzantine, medieval, and modern numismatic data to make the book useful to scholars who study other eras as well.

The early chapters of the book deal with the nature, iconography, and historical uses of coinage. Here Casey surveys the origins of coins in ancient commercial transactions and governmental needs, their development into a propaganda medium for governmental policies, and modern techniques for gleaning historical data from them. He emphasizes that “coins are primary, contemporary historical documents” (37) and that they can offer useful information to the historian. Through observation of direct allusions or elucidation of indirect allusions on the coins and by field observation of the distribution pattern of coins, the researcher can validate, correct, or provide evidence lacking in written sources. For instance, Procopius in his *Secret History* condemned Justinian for stopping the pay of frontier troops and endangering the borders of the sixth-century Byzantine Empire, but the coin record shows that the pay stoppage happened only in Procopius’ native Palestine, and he incorrectly exaggerated a local event into an empire-wide phenomenon (45–46).

The middle chapters deal with coin hoards, archaeological site finds, and the proper methods of interpreting this material. Casey describes in detail the different categories of coin hoards, the various factors governing coin losses, and the places where surviving specimens are most likely to be found. Throughout this section he stresses the need for macroanalysis with site-by-site and like-with-like comparisons of numismatic data over and against the habit of site archaeologists to generalize from the particulars of their own
digs so that correct interpretations of political events and economic trends can be established. His arguments for reinterpreting the Roman coin hoards from third-century Gaul and Britain in economic rather than military terms are most compelling (62-66).

The later chapters of the book survey current techniques of scientific analysis of coins and proper methods of recording numismatic data. Casey shows that the chemical and X-ray analyses now available to numismatists open up a whole new range of information, such as the sources of raw materials and trade routes of coin-issuing powers, and the metrological standards and metalurgical problems of their mints. An electron microprobe analysis has even provided the historical correction that Henry I's moneyers, who suffered castration in 1124 as punishment for issuing adulterated coins, were innocent (137).

The book is a well-written introductory survey, with limited notes and bibliography for further reading. It offers only limited information to political and cultural historians interested in the propagandistic uses of coin inscriptions and iconography (see Michael Grant, Harold Mattingly, J. P. C. Kent, and P. Grierson). However, it does provide the latest information and valuable guidelines to archaeologists and economic historians on the careful treatment and interpretation of numismatic evidence.

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This monograph is a translation of a work by a professor of Greek and Roman history at the Catholic University of Milan. It is a collection of diverse essays all having to do with the relationship between Christians and the Roman Empire.

Part I is a narrative history in which Sordi sets out an account of the treatment of Christians by the state from the time of the trial of Christ through the reign of Constantine. Writing within the context of a reassessment by historians of the Roman persecution of Christians, Sordi argues that the conflict was fundamentally religious rather than political—in other words, that Christianity was not perceived as a security threat to the state. In Part II, Sordi examines the relationship between Christianity and Roman society. She discusses attitudes and expectations within Roman culture that made it congenial to the reception of Christianity, and concomitantly,