

Were coins used in the Roman Empire more for propaganda purposes or as a monetary means? Examples of how coins were used during Nero's reign and how some literary sources link to them.

Coins have been around since about 4000 BC and have been used for many purposes. Generally we think of coins as a monetary means of paying for goods or services, but this has not always been their use. Coins have been used in the past for propaganda uses and as a sign of status. Their use for propaganda was very widespread and important throughout the era of the Roman Republic and the Empire. One main reason for this widespread use of coins for propaganda was the extensive land that the Romans came to dominate in their growing empire. This meant that Roman rulers could not visit or be directly known to all of the subject inhabitants. With this problem the emperors had to find another way of promoting and advertising all of the great successes that they had. One method of doing this was through coins, where the reverse side was minted with a sign of the emperor's achievements. These achievements included famous victories in battle or personal events such as marriages within the imperial family.

Coins minted in the time of the Emperor Nero, the fifth and last of the Julio-Claudian emperors who ruled from 54 to 68 AD, are a key example of the use of propaganda. If we examine some of his coins we can get a sense of his power and how he was portrayed. Many of his coins show that he liked to be portrayed as powerful, as he is depicted wearing his armour, showing his importance as a figure in battle. This follows the tradition of the past where famous generals of the Republic and the first of the emperors, Augustus are commonly shown in military pose. Many other coins show pictures of his achievements or items that were important to him, one being his marriage to Poppaea. The reverse side of these coins where this information was portrayed can be backed up by literary texts, one by Suetonius and the other Tacitus.



The depiction of Poppaea on Nero's coin shows that Nero wanted to announce to his people that he had married this woman. The way that they are both facing to the right symbolises that they are of equal status. Poppaea was Nero's second wife, as he divorced Octavia to marry her. The family of Nero disliked her, as they wrote 'Octavia all over her statues and overturned them',¹ most of them rioted. The riot did not stop until Nero ordered 'troops to club them'. When Nero had divorced her, and then married Agrippina, Poppaea was not happy, so she had her head to be cut off, and 'taken to Poppaea to see'².



An early coin of the period of Nero depicts only his head and little on the back, only showing brief pieces of information about him. One of the coins that I have found shows just this, where only his head and the initials of S C with a wreath around are shown. This tells me a lot about the character of Nero. It shows that he is not well known and needs to promote his qualities to his people. The wreath on the coin shows that he is the top priest of the college of augurs³. This symbolism was used to show his personal importance, how mighty he was other than being an emperor. It also shows that he had the

¹ Tacitus, page 337

² Tacitus, page 343

³ A priesthood that predicted the future through signs of nature

usual religious tendencies. The use of the initials S C (Senatus Consulto) on Roman coins was to show that they were approved by the senate. Although the Senate had little real power by the time of Nero, he continued to allow it certain privileges as previous emperors had done.



This coin, minted around 66 BC shows a depiction of the Golden House, built at the height of Nero's reign. It was the palace that Nero erected after the notorious great fire, and he came

under great suspicion amongst the people of Rome, as many thought that he had burnt down part of the city in order to make room for the palace to be built. This great palace is described as being 'a hundred and twenty feet high; and it was so extensive that it had a triple colonnade a mile long'⁴. This extensive building I assume was built to show how grand a person he was, and it was used as an example to show his power, and prowess. This is why this has been used on coins, to show people and other rulers, how well off he is. Also, his face and neck seem much stockier than on the coin from his earlier period. Perhaps this shows his love of luxurious living and the banquets for which he was famous.



This coin depicts Nero as Apollo⁵, playing the lyre⁶. His head has a crown depicting the rays of the sun, another symbol of the

⁴ Suetonius part 31, lines 4 - 5

⁵ Apollo is the Greek god of light, poetry and music

⁶ The lyre is a stringed musical instrument. They were associated with moderation.

god Apollo. Nero was a great supporter of music and poetry; he believed that this was a quality of an upper class man. He aspired to be like Terpnus⁷, and asked for him to play the lyre and sing, which he did for 'many successive days until late at night'⁸. When Nero was young he practiced to great lengths to become a better artist, 'neglecting none of the exercises which artists of that kind are in the habit of following, to preserve or strengthen their voices. For he used to lie upon his back and hold a leaden plate on his chest, purge himself by the syringe and by vomiting, and deny himself fruits and all foods injurious to the voice'⁹. Depicting the lyre on a coin shows that he must be comfortable with the level of his musical talents, 'finally encouraged by his progress'¹⁰. This shows a part of Nero's personal life. This expression of an emperor's personal life can make or break an emperor; it can be either taken as a weakness or strength. In this case Nero saw it as a strength, as it was used as a propaganda tool after Nero sang and played the lyre at 'his début at Naples, where he did not cease singing until he had finished the number which he had begun'¹¹. He minted himself playing the lyre on a coin, to express his love for the musical arts and to show that he had musical talent. There is one problem however, since we will never know if he actually had real musical talent, as writers of his time were reluctant to criticise and wouldn't portray him in a bad light. Nero also liked to become a poet, as he thought that is was eloquent. 'He is always writing poetry... now Nero has become fond of it'¹². Tacitus explains that people disliked his fondness of the arts as he was not very good at them, and that they 'make fun of his singing'.

⁷ The greatest master of the lyre in Roman times

⁸ Suetonius part 20, lines 2 - 3

⁹ Suetonius part 20, lines 3 - 6

¹⁰ Suetonius part 20, line 6

¹¹ Suetonius part 20, lines 8 - 9

¹² Tacitus, page 337



The reverse side of this coin shows Nero on horseback with a companion prancing to the right and the obverse side shows Nero's head wearing an aegis¹³. The aegis is used to show power, as it represents a sign of bravery. The aegis is a sign of protection from dangers. This tells me that Nero was a wary person, who feared for his life. In Suetonius we are told that Nero 'was frightened by manifest portents from dreams, auspices and omens, both old and new'¹⁴. I believe that this coin was minted in the later part of his reign, when he had become more fearful of his enemies. The reverse side of this coin shows Nero on horseback with a companion. I think that this coin shows Nero at some gladiatorial games, it either represents him at the games or someone who rides in his name. Nero from 'his earliest years he had a special passion for horses and talked constantly about the games in the Circus'.



The reverse side of this coin depicts the Temple of Janus, where it has its doors closed. This closed door represents that there is peace and that the Roman Empire is not at war. We know that the closing of the temple's door represents that there is peace because of the Roman historian Livy. He wrote

¹³ It is the skin of a goat, some refer it to the goat Amalthea. Some historians say that it is the skin of the destructive monster Aegis that Minerva once slew.

¹⁴ Suetonius, part 46, line 1

that 'the doors of the Temple of Janus always remained open during time when Rome was at war'. I think that Nero decided to mint this on one of his coins to boost his popularity and to make it seem that his reign was of peace and prosperity.

So far I have talked about the examples of the uses of Nero's coins as a propaganda use. The main purpose of coins was their use as money. A use to pay for goods and services, the purchase of food and everyday items was bartered with money. The Roman currency was made of many different coins which were made of different metals; these metals would determine their value. Many coins would be made of the same base metal but their size would vary, this would allow the coins to be of different value. The different base metals that were used were gold, silver, bronze, and copper. The *aureus*, was minted as a gold coin; the use of this coin was to allow people to pay off large debts easily. This coin had a base metal of 99% gold and weighed about 7.7 grams. This combination of base metal percentage and weight, made this the coin that was worth the most, thus making it a coin that was of rarity compared to other commonly used coins. The *quadrans*, was a small bronze coin, its size suggests to me that it was of little value, and thus making it the most commonly use coin.

Coins developed throughout history and their metals developed too. Most coins to the present date have many metals combined to make an alloy, thus making it hard for a coin to be valued by its base metal. So we stamp a value on the coin. One coin that changed was the Antoninianus¹⁵. This coin was once a silver coin but, then became a copper coin that that had a silver outer coating. This coin is like the modern day coin, where coins are made of cheap base metals. But this coin was still valued by the base metal that it was made of, so it became a coin that had its value decreased.

How other emperors used coins

¹⁵ A coin that was created by Caracalla, the son of the later Emperor Septimius Severus and Julia Domina

I think that many people of the Roman era paid no attention to the detail of the pictures on the coins, even though they were created as propaganda. The main people that would analyse that coins would be other important people, people who owned their own regions. They would appreciate the use of coins as propaganda, more than 'common' citizens. Many citizens would deface the Roman coins, as they would trim down the coin, by taking a shaving off it. This was a well know practice, as if a person could accumulate enough base metal they would have enough to barter with. So this shows that a coin's main attribute to 'common' people would be the value of its base metal. This shows me that Roman people were greedy and that they would do anything to gain more money.

In conclusion the emperors used the coins not as a monetary means but as a means to boost their reputation and to make them seem as though they have many likeable qualities. These coins were used to show their lifestyle and provide evidence of their great achievements. It can be perceived now that these emperors needed to use coins for propaganda as they never felt that everyone liked them as an emperor. In Nero's reign there were many revolts. This made Nero very aware that he had a lack of support from his citizens and that this made him worry about what people thought about him. I think this was a key reason why Nero used coins to such a extent to show himself off.

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Proof reading OK

Page numbers OK

Word count 2,041 excluding Bibliography.

About 1,000 more words needed, all of which should mention the literary sources. You need at least 2 more coins that show aspects of Nero's reign with comparative comments on what Suetonius or Tacitus say about him.

The stuff about coins and base metals etc on p.5 is irrelevant to the title. Also it is of the wrong period.

Very little deep analysis or thoughtful personal comment for AO2.

AO1 20

AO2 17

AO3 6

43

Grade E (or D/C if the extra words and subject matter are added as recommended)

Bibliography Needs to contain more books.