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Maiorina and maior as names of Roman coins

John R. Melville Jones

As all numismatists, dealers and collectors who are interested in Roman coinage from the time of Diocletian onwards know, there is considerable uncertainty regarding the names of some of the coins that were issued, except for the gold ones¹. This is primarily because the official legal documents (as opposed to the unreliable *Historia Augusta*) that mention them are so few in number.

I believe that I may have solved a problem regarding two of these names, *maiorina* and *maior*, each of them combined with *pecunia*². My *modus operandi* has been to look at the exact dates when these coins are mentioned in ancient legal documents, and then to see what coins were actually being minted at these times. Also, I am assuming that the language used in these legal documents must have had a precise meaning. We are dealing with the kind of writing in which precision is to be expected, even if sometimes outdated language is used for traditional reasons, just as in Britain payments were demanded in ‘guineas’ even after these gold coins were no longer minted. No previous numismatist has adopted exactly the same approach.

The first scholar to address this question, Theodor MOMMSEN, included some remarks on it in his *Geschichte des römischen Münzwesens*³. He assumed that *maior* and *maiorina* were simply alternative ways of referring to the same coin, and went no further. I agree with him, but as will be explained, there is more to it than this. I insist that in formal legal documents any variation in the names of things must have a reason.

Let us look at these documents in chronological order. First, there is a law of February 12, A. D. 349 (dated because of the names of the consuls which it mentions), which ordains that persons who extract silver from coins should be executed:

“We have learned that some *flaturarii*, both criminally and repeatedly, are purging the *maiorina pecunia* when the *argentum* is separate from the *aes*. Therefore, if anyone hereafter is apprehended in this scheme, he will recognise that he has committed an act deserving of capital punishment”⁴.

It is easy to understand this, when we look at what was happening to Roman coinage at this time. A large number of coins, when they were freshly minted, had a silvery appearance. Because of this they are sometimes described as ‘silver-enhanced’, although this suggests that some way had been found of bringing some of the small amount of silver that they contained to the surface, but I am informed by a colleague who has some metallurgical knowledge that this is not possible. What is called a ‘law of eutectics’ says that in a case such as this (an alloy of copper or bronze with silver), it is impossible to separate the silver from the other metal or metals in this way. The silver was more likely to have been heated and then applied somehow, perhaps by dipping a copper coin or bronze into melted silver a few times. The *flaturarii* would have been responsible for managing furnaces that were hot enough to do this, so it is much more likely that they would have set aside (‘separated’) a small proportion of the silver that they had been given to include in the supposedly silver-surfaced coinage of the time, and kept it for themselves. It would have been difficult, or even impossible,

1 In pp. 55–67 of Volume VIII of *The Roman Imperial Coinage* (London 1981), J. P. C. KENT included a section entitled ‘The Monetary System’. At p. 58 he remarked on the impossibility of giving correct names to silver and billon coins of the fourth and fifth centuries, and stated that ‘the nomenclature adopted in this volume will be to some extent conventional,’ meaning that he had no expectation that some of the names used in modern times for these coins were actually used by the Romans.

2 My conclusions differ from those reached in the otherwise excellent work by P. GRIERSON – M. MAYS, *Catalogue of Late Roman Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection. From Arcadius and Honorius to the Accession of Anastasius* (Dumbarton Oaks 1992). The *maiorina* (but not the *maior*) *pecunia* is discussed on pp. 28, 40 and 44, and identified on the second and third of these pages with what prudent numismatists call the $\text{Æ}2$ coin. I prefer to identify it with the $\text{Æ}3$ coin. I also disagree with their opinion that the *centenionalis* (see pp. 28, 40 and 123) was a bronze coin. HENDY (see note 7 and the text to which it refers) provided a very good analysis of Roman coinage at this time, but did not distinguish between the meanings of *maior* and *maiorina* to refer to coins at different times, which I insist must have been used in a deliberate and careful way in legal documents.

3 Th. MOMMSEN, *Geschichte des römischen Münzwesens* (Berlin 1860), pp. 803–808. On p. 805 he wrote simply “Dagegen eignet dem Kupferstück der diocletianischen und der Folgezeit die Bezeichnung *folllis* oder *pecunia maior* oder *maiorina*,” suggesting that these were simply variant names without any further significance. In the French

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translation by the Duc de
 Blacas published in Paris five
 years later (vol. III, pp. 104–
 106, at pp. 104–105), the text
 translates the original, but in
 note 2 on p. 105 we read an
 expansion of this, “*Follis et*
pecunia maior ou *majorina*
 sont deux noms différents
 employés pour la même mon-
 naie”, followed by a reference
 to the texts mentioned here,
 which shows that the meaning
 of these words had still not
 been understood in the way in
 which I believe that they
 should be.

4 Codex Theodosianus 9.21.6:
 IDEM A. LIMENIO P. PO: Com-
 perimus nonnullos faturarios
 maiorinam pecuniam non
 minus criminose quam crebre
 separato argento ab aere pur-
 gare ... Si quis igitur post haec
 fuerit in hac machinatione
 deprehensus, capitaliter se
 fecisse cognoscat. PP. PRID.
 ID. FEB. LIMENIO ET CATV-
 LLINO CONSS.

5 Codex Theodosianus 9.23, 0,
 1.1–3: Si quis pecunias con-
 flaverit vel mercandi causa tran-
 stulerit aut vetitas contra-
 verit.
 1. IMP. CONSTANTIVS A. ET
 IULIANVS CAES. AD
 RVFINVM P. PO. Quicumque
 vel conflare pecunias vel ad
 diversa vendendi causa trans-
 ferre detegitur, sacrilegi sen-
 tentiam subeat et capite plec-
 tatur. Portus enim litoraue
 diversa, quo facilius esse navi-
 bus consuevit accessus, et
 itineris tramites statuimus
 custodiri per idoneos officiales
 ac praepositos a praesidibus et
 nonnullis praeditis dignitate,
 ut cognita veritate provin-
 ciarum rectores obnoxios
 legibus puniant. Officia quoque
 inlenso periculo subiacebunt.

with ancient technology, to decide exactly how much silver the coins that they were minting had on their surfaces.

The situation was quite different from what happened in earlier times, when mint officials would not only have known how pure the silver in their coins should have been, but would have been able to test it. Now with only a little silver on the surface, and a negligible amount in the rest of the coins, this would have been impossible. This explains why they were targeted in this edict.

What does *maiorina* mean? It is an unusual word, found only a few times, and always in this context. It combines *maior*, ‘greater’ with the diminutive adjectival termination *-inus*, in the feminine form in this case agreeing with *pecunia*, and seems to mean ‘slightly greater’.

I believe that by this time *pecunia* had come to be used in documents of this kind to describe the sort of silvered coinage that was being produced, because the metal that it contained was neither simply *argentum* nor *aes*, but I will not discuss this question here, although in some of the passages quoted you will see that it makes perfect sense.

In this year, when Constans and Constantius II were ruling, there were four different denominations that could have been described as *pecunia*. The simplest way to describe them is as $\text{Æ}1$ (the largest), descending to $\text{Æ}4$ (the smallest), even though they are strictly speaking not *aes* coins because of the very small amount of silver that they contained.

My suggestion is that the coin that is called ‘slightly greater’ in this document has to be the $\text{Æ}3$ coin, because it was slightly greater than the smallest one (two larger ones, the $\text{Æ}1$ and the $\text{Æ}2$, were still being minted), and because it is described in the first text quoted above as *pecunia* rather than *aes* because it contained a small amount of silver, perhaps a trace within it and the rest on the surface. It has to be the $\text{Æ}3$ coin, because to use this word to describe the $\text{Æ}1$ or $\text{Æ}2$ coins would have been confusing.

We come now to another document which is to be dated to March 8, A. D. 356 (in the consulships of Constantius for the 8th time and Julian for the 3rd time), and is longer and more complicated⁵.

“If anyone has melted down *pecuniae* or transported them or dealt in forbidden ones.”

“THE EMPERORS CONSTANTIVS AUGUSTUS AND JULIANVS CAESAR TO RUFINVS, PRAETORIAN PREFECT.”

“Anyone who is detected in either melting down *pecuniae* or transporting them to different places in order to sell them is to be found guilty of committing sacrilege and suffer capital punishment. For this reason, We have ordered harbours and various shores where it has been customary for ships to have easy access, and minor roads, to be guarded by appropriate public servants, and by persons appointed by governors and certain others possessed of authority, so that after learning the truth the rectors of provinces may punish the guilty in accordance with the laws; and their official staff will also be subject to immense peril.”

“1. Nor should any merchant carry on his own animals for the sake of his expenses more than a thousand *follis* of the *pecunia* that is assigned for public use. And if anyone is detected in carrying a greater amount, his property is to

be vindicated to the control of the *fiscus*, and he is to be punished by being exiled. For we do not consider that all merchants should bring out the *pecuniae* carried on Our ships, since we permit only those *pecuniae* established for public use to be transported, and likewise only those goods to be purchased which are carried for merchants to different places in a traditional manner.”

“2. Likewise, We proclaim that not all merchants should export *pecuniae* carried on their ships, and only those kinds should be acquired that are customarily carried by merchants to various places. Also, no one will be allowed to buy *pecuniae* or to deal in money that has been forbidden to be used, since a price should be fixed in money established for public use, not in merchandise.”

“3. Finally, it is Our pleasure that if any *nummus*, except for one that is continuing to be in public use, happens to be found in the possession of any merchant, it shall be vindicated to the control of the *fiscus*, together with all the property of the offender. And if by chance ships come to any provinces with merchandise, everything shall be sold with the customary freedom, except for the coins that they usually call *maiorinae*, or *centenionales communes*, or others that they know are forbidden. RECEIVED ON THE EIGHTH DAY BEFORE THE IDES OF MARCH AT CONSTANTINA (Arelatum / Arles)”⁶.

HENDY says, when reviewing this text⁷, that this law is ‘a somewhat confused one’, and may be a conflation of more than one regulation. But we must do what we can, and if it is a conflation, that does not mean that the individual parts are worded incorrectly. To begin with the opening words, they suggest that some persons are melting down *pecunia*, and this is forbidden. What does this mean? Perhaps it means heating the coins carefully and finding a way of collecting the surface silver before the cores of the coins also melted (copper has a higher melting point than silver).

But in the following paragraph it is stated that there is now a limit on the exportation (presumably to be used for doing business in the usual way) of the number of coins that could be described as *pecunia*. When we combine this with the previous paragraph, it seems that the Roman government wanted to keep as many silver-surfaced coins in circulation as possible. There is an obvious reason for this: the authorities were hoping not to have to mint any more of these coins, since it had become so difficult to maintain the amount of silver that actually went into the coins.

The succeeding paragraphs make it clear that some legislation has already defined the kind of *nummus* (described as *decargurus*, therefore a silver coin) that might be used in trade in the Roman Empire, but this is not relevant to the question that is being discussed here.

The last sentence says that use of the coins that they call *maiorinae*, or *centenionales communes* outside the Roman empire is forbidden. The Latin is ambiguous: *vel* may imply that these are two names for the same kind of coin, or that these words are names for two different kinds of coin. However, a later law, which will be discussed next, solves this problem, because it seems to refer to a *centenionalis nummus* and to *maior pecunia* separately. Since, as has already been stated, *pecunia* at this time usually refers in official documents to bronze coins containing a small amount, if any, of silver, which had been treated in such a way that some silver was also visible on the surface of each freshly

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1.1. Nec vero aliquis negotiatorum plus mille follibus pecuniae in usu publico constitutae animalibus propriis sumptuum gratia portare debet. Aut si ampliore modum quisquam vehere detegatur, facultates eius fisci dominio vindicentur, et ipse adficiatur exilio.

1.2. Nam pecunias navibus vectas non omnes iudicamus mercatores debere promere, quippe in usu tantum publico pecunias constitutas permittimus convehi itidemque eas solas species emi, quae mercatoribus more solemnium ad diversa portantur. Pecunias vero nulli emere omnino fas erit nec vetitas contrectare, quia in usu publico constitutas pretium oportet esse, non mercem.

1.3. Placet denique ut si quis forsitan nummus praeter eum qui in usu publico perseverat, aput aliquem mercatorem fuerit inventus, fisci dominio cum omnibus delinquentis facultatibus vindicatur. Et si forte cum mercibus ad quas-cumque provincias venerint naves, cuncta solita licentia mercabuntur praeter pecunias quas more solito maiorinas vel centenionales communes appellant, vel ceteras quas vetitas esse cognoscunt. ACC. VIII ID. MAR. CONSTANTINA CONSTANTIO A. VIII ET IVLIANO CAES. CONSS.

6. Codex Theodosianus 9.23.1: Quicumque vel conflare pecunias vel ad diversa vendendi causa transferre detegitur, sacrilegi sententiam subeat et capite plectatur. Portus enim litora que diversa, quo facilius esse navibus consuevit accessus, et itineris tramites statumus custodiri per idoneos officiales ac praepositos a praesidibus et nonnullis praeditis dignitate, ut cognita veritate provinciarum rectores obnoxios legibus puniant. Officia quoque inmenso periculo subiacebunt.

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7. M. HENDY, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy* (Cambridge 1985), pp. 291–294 and pp. 470–474.

8. Codex Theodosianus 9.23.2. IMPP. ARCADIVS et HONORIVS AA. DEXTRO P. PO. Centenionalem tantum nummum in conversatione publica tractari praecipimus, maioris pecuniae figuracione submota. Nullus igitur decargyrum nummum alio audeat commutare, sciens fisco eandem pecuniam vindicandam, quae in publica potuerit conversatione deprehendi. DAT. PRID. ID. APRIL. MEDIOLANO OLYBRIO ET PROBINO CONSS.

minted coin, the use of *nummus* here rather than *pecunia* suggests that the *centenionalis* was a silver coin, worth a hundred of something. It may have been worth a hundred *denarii* (the *denarius* was no longer minted, but the name was still used, just as the names of the *as* and the *sestertius* had been used earlier, even when minting of them had been discontinued), but I will not attempt to identify it here, because if this law is a conflation of several other laws, it is not possible to decide which coin the expression refers to.

The important point, however, with regard to the subject of this article, is that the Roman government was doing its best to keep as many silver surfaced coins from leaving its territory, so that it would not be necessary to mint any more, unless this was essential.

Four ‘silver surfaced’ bronze coins were still being minted in the later years of the reigns of Constantius II and Julian, but when we come to Jovian’s brief reign in A. D. 363–364, there were only two. It seems therefore that this law began to take effect after A. D. 356, although for a while after that there was a return to small issues of three or even four denominations of this coinage. It seems that although the Roman government was combating the theft of silver by threatening execution for those who were detected in doing this, and trying to prevent the export of more than a small amount of *pecunia*, it was necessary occasionally to mint a few more of these coins so that enough were available for those who wished to make purchases or payments of low value.

We then find something slightly different, *maior pecunia*, in a later law of April 12, A. D. 395, delivered at Milan during the reigns of Arcadius in the east and Honorius in the west⁸.

“We command that only the *centenionalis nummus* is to be handled in a public transaction, after the coining of the *maior pecunia* has been discontinued. No one should therefore dare to exchange the *decargyrum nummus* for another coin, knowing that that coinage, if it can be detected in a private transaction, is to be vindicated to the *fiscus*.”

No certainty is possible, but my interpretation of this legislation is that in April 395 minting of all *pecunia* (*aes* coinage with a silver surface) was about to stop, at least for a while. It is impossible to date the coins of these emperors closely, but it is clear that one denomination ($\text{Æ}1$) was no longer being minted, and the $\text{Æ}2$ coins were now also being discontinued. This left only two, the larger of which (previously described as $\text{Æ}3$) had now become the *maior pecunia*, rather than *maiorina pecunia*, and after the smallest denomination (the one called $\text{Æ}4$) was also being discontinued, this would have left only what was still being called the *maior pecunia* in circulation. But minting of this coin (whatever it was called when it was the sole survivor) was also about to stop, at least for a while. In discussing this law HENDY (at p. 475) does not attempt to explain what the *decargyrum nummus* was, and this is understandable, because there were several silver coins issued by Honorius at this time.

If this is right, it seems that a different name was being used in legal documents to refer to the same coin because at different times it had a different place in the order of the coins being minted: at first it had been the third in size of four coins, now it had for a very short time become the larger of only two coins. Later emperors minted some *pecunia* again, perhaps because for small purchases a

variety of denominations had been shown to be necessary, and there was a shortage of available coins in circulation, but no surviving legislation refers to this.

Perhaps this way of naming the coins can be compared to the practice followed in English schools, in the days when Latin was a normal subject, and boys were identified only by their surnames, forenames being considered too intimate (this was my experience). Someone, when entering the school, might be identified, if there were already two other boys there with the same surname, by adding *terts* (for *tertius*) to his name. As the older boys left the school, he would gradually move up to being *minor* and finally to *major* (if by that time one or more younger boys with the same surname had entered the school after him). However, the term *maiorinus* was not used, although it would perhaps have been appropriate if two boys with the same surname had become the oldest ones after others had entered the school, and one was perhaps a little older than the other.

The background to this legislation seems to be that for a long time the amount of silver in the silver-surfaced Roman coinage had been decreasing, and the authorities had discovered that some persons were taking advantage of the fact that the process of silver-coating these essentially billon coins led to *flaturarii* who had been given appropriate quantities of *aes* and *argentum*, taking some of the silver that was about to be used, and selling it for themselves, since by this time it would have become impossible to work out what the exact proportions of bronze and silver were in the coins. We can only guess at the effect that this legislation actually had, but it seems, to judge from the surviving coins, that minting of them came more or less to a stop for a while, then resumed in small quantities, just enough to provide what was needed, since hoards understandably show that they were rarely sequestered in large amounts, because of their low value.

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