Etruscan Numismatics-An Introduction

Andrew Burnett
In making some introductory remarks to the following two papers concerning the coins of the Etruscans, I should stress that, while I have myself written on the coinages of ancient Italy, I do not claim any particular expertise in Etruscan coinage. In fact my main involvement in the subject was helping with the relevant parts of the display in the “Italy before the Roman Empire” gallery of the British Museum, which is one of the few places in the world where members of the public can see a good selection of Etruscan coinage.

This may perhaps seem odd – how can one study the coinage of ancient Italy without considering the Etruscans in detail? The answer lies in the very curious nature of Etruscan coinage: for the most part it was produced on a very small scale, and for the most part it did not interact with other coinages – it did not, for example, circulate with the other Greek or early Roman coinages of Italy. And while most scholarship on Etruscan coinage has focussed on its chronology, attribution to mints or on the explanation for individual issues, it seems to me that the most important question is usually ignored – why is there so little Etruscan coinage? And what does this tell us about Etruscan society or other considerations like Etruscan self-identity?

More of that later. First, I want to introduce the two main papers, which together form a very good introduction to and a very good overview of a very complicated subject, and they should enable the non-numismatist to find his or her way around many of the difficulties in the subject. The title of the first, by Italo Vecchi, is “Etruscan numismatics: a notorious dating and identification problem,” and his title is the perfect expression of the two main problems with Etruscan coins: they are very hard to date and often hard to attribute securely to a mint. These themes appear prominently in the other paper, by Novella Vismara. However, the title of her paper, “Etruschi: bibliografia numismatica (1997-2001)” is a bit misleading because it is much more than just a bibliography. The list of publications and internet sites is accompanied by a number of perciipient comments, and the paper is con-
cluded with a substantial discussion of a number of important issues.

With these papers before us we can ask – where are we with Etruscan coinage today? There are four main aspects I would like to touch on: the description of the material, its attribution to mints, its chronology and finally its interpretation.

(1) First, the description of the material – how well do we know Etruscan coinage? The answer is that today we know it very well. We can be confident that we know most of the coins that were produced and can describe the designs that appear on them fairly accurately, if conventionally.¹ The standard catalogue for Etruscan coinage has until recently been the list provided in A. Sambon’s *Les monnaies antiques de l’Italie*, published over a century ago (Paris, 1903). The material known to Sambon has been supplemented by many studies, most notably by the publication of the conference on Etruscan coinage held in Naples in 1975,² a conference and publication which marked an enormous advance in the study of the subject. Since then there has been a series of articles by I. Vecchi,³ while a good overview can be found in F. Catalli’s *Monete etrusche* (Rome, 1990). Sambon’s listing has now been replaced by the more modern list given by M. Crawford in the recently published Italian volume of the third edition of *Historia Numorum* (British Museum Press, 2001).⁴ For the time being I am sure that this will remain the standard listing.

But while we can be confident that our knowledge of the coinage is more or less complete, new issues do still turn up, as Vismara points out in her paper, but only very rarely.

(2) The attribution to mints is, in only a few cases, based on inscriptions on the coins, such as those that refer to Volterra, Vetulonia or Populonia. However most Etruscan coins do not bear inscriptions identifying their source, and the evidence of find-spots must be used. Obviously it all depends on how many find-spots we have: in some cases we can be no more sure than “central Etruria” or something like that, but in others the growing body of archaeological evidence is beginning to provide convincing arguments. A good example concerns the so-called ‘oval’ series of *aes grave*, which both Ambrosini and Crawford have recently, independently and convincingly, argued should be associated with Volstini.⁵ Rarer issues are much harder to assign; whereas we can perhaps be confident that the silver pieces inscribed *thezi* are mostly found at or near Vulci and so presumably were made there, we have as yet no clear idea regarding the mint(s) of the curiously produced incuse bronzes from somewhere in central Etruria; and I doubt that we will ever know the origin of the gold pieces inscribed *velznani* and *velsu*. Again, whether or not coins were made at Pisa or Lucca remains uncertain, though possible. So the non-specialist should still treat the mint attribution of much of the coinage with much caution.

(3) Chronology is even more difficult. While we can be sure that Etruscan coinage covers the period from the 5th century to the 3rd century BC, and that most of it was made in the 3rd century, it is usually very hard to bring much more precision with any great confidence. The main reason for this is the isolated nature of Etruscan coinage, already mentioned. There are two main aspects. First, although there are a few hoards of Etruscan coins, they do not include other coins, so we cannot use hoards to see what was circulating together at a given
time, as we can do for almost every other area of ancient coinage. Secondly, because Etruscan coinage is so isolated we cannot be sure of the validity of using arguments by analogy – we just do not know how applicable they are. Can we compare the weight standards used by Etruscan cast bronze coins with those used by early Roman coins, and assert that the same weight standards were in use at the same time? This seems unproven to me. Can we use stylistic considerations? Again, it’s a difficult area. On the one hand we are tempted to date the peculiar bronzes with incuse reverses to the late 4th century because that is when one finds similar coins in Sicily, for example at Syracuse. The temptation to do so is strong because there is absolutely no other dating evidence; yet we must hesitate before accepting it. A much more notorious case concerns the lion’s head gold staters which have been dated stylistically to the 5th century, but whose system of value marks convinces others that they belong in the 3rd century. And should we relate such value marks to those in use in late 3rd century Rome, or not?

As a result of these and other uncertainties, more weight has come in recent years to be placed on the importance of some individual finds in archaeological contexts, such as the evidence from the finds made at Prestino and Ponte Gini for the dating of different phases of the silver coinage of Populonia. This seems, on the face of it, convincing, but again a note of caution must be sounded. In another field, that of early Roman coinage (another battlefield of chronology!), a number of similar arguments have been held at one time or another, about the importance of individual finds from Selinunte or Monte Adranone, and the (misleading) lessons of these should be learnt. The archaeological evidence of deposits may seem very plausible, especially in the more or less complete absence of any other evidence, but we must remain hesitant about asserting conclusions based upon it with too great a certainty. In fact Etruscan numismatics is an area where numismatists have sometimes misled historians and archaeologists by being much too confident about dates. It is much more important to stress how much is not known, rather than what seems to be known. Italo Vecchi has rightly referred to the debate as “an arena of notorious dating.”

(4) Interpretation. Etruscan coinage was made on a tiny scale at one or two centres in the fifth century. More seems to have been made in the 4th century, while the 3rd century is the period that saw the production of most Etruscan coinage, in silver and in bronze (both struck and cast). Vismara’s paper brings out well the differing approaches to the interpretation of the coins. What were they made for? How were they used? There have been a number of studies, suggesting different approaches: external trade, internal prestige, paying mercenaries – these have all been suggested by one author or another.

What arguments can we use to develop these alternative ideas? The designs on the coins give no indication of their purpose or function, and the only solid information we have is derived from finds. From these we can conclude that sometimes Etruscan coins were deposited in tombs (e.g., Tarquinia); that sometimes their circulation is related to that of pottery of a similar origin (e.g., Catalli 1975); and that sometimes they seem to circulate beyond the likely territory of a city (e.g., Bruni on Volterra). And, from a negative point of view, we can re-iterate that Etruscan coins are not found in hoards with other coins, whether inside or outside Etruria, and that very few Etruscan coins have been found outside Etruria (only
a couple of instances, e.g., Menorca or Sagunto).

The rarity of Etruscan coinage and its limited circulation show that ‘the economy of Etruria’ (whatever we mean by that phrase) was not significantly monetised: not many Etruscan coins were made or circulated and very few other coins entered the area during the period in which Etruscan coinage was being produced. So Etruria did not really participate in the use of coinage in the way that most of the Greek world did between the 6th and 3rd centuries BC. In that respect it was actually like many other parts of the ancient world – Spain, Gaul, the Balkans or the Levant. Perhaps indeed we should look at those areas, and not at Rome or Greece, for ideas of how we should interpret Etruscan coinage. In some of those areas coinage, as in Etruria, was rare but not unknown. Sometimes it also lacks inscriptions giving the origins of the coins. And sometimes one finds unusual techniques of production, just as one does with the curious uniface nature of many Etruscan coins. Yet in making any analogies, we must also be aware of the differences, as far as we can reconstruct them, between Etruscan and other societies.

That must be for the future; also for the future is the promised study by Italo Vecchi, Novella Vismara, Fiorenzo Catalli and Rodolfo Martini, which will produce a new and full listing of Etruscan coins. We can look forward to that, and to the discovery and publication of more archaeological evidence, as a way of gradually pushing back the uncertainties in this very uncertain field. But we will be very lucky if we get enough of the right sort of evidence.

Andrew Burnett

NOTES

1. By ‘conventionally’ I mean that the designs which appear on the coins are usually described in terms of Greek iconography, but this might sometimes be misleading in terms of Etruscan iconography.
2. Convegno Napoli. See also the update by Cristofani 1989, 83-100.
4. Rutter 2001. The section of Etruria (pp. 23-42) is by M. H. Crawford.
5. For full references, see Vismara’s bibliography.
6. For Selinunte and Monte Adranone, see Crawford 1998, 119-23.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


