AES SIGNATUM

When I was first asked to join in paying homage to our friend, Dr. Hoffiller, in this volume, and began to cast about me for a subject that might have some appropriateness to the occasion, some chance brought to my mind the great Mazin hoard, and I felt at once that in the fragments of Aes Signatum in that hoard I had a subject that would link my London studies, by way of Italy, with the neighbourhood of Dr. Hoffiller's home.

Aes Signatum should strictly, of course, mean ‚coined bronze'; but we have become accustomed to use it in a special sense, restricting it to the bars that bear types, but (as a rule) no legend and no mark of value. It is in this sense that the words will be used here. Among the bars we will select for special study those that bear types of the same general character as coin-types on both sides, neglecting those other bars, much more irregular in size and weight, that have more rudimentary types, such as fish-bone pattern or crescents. We hope to demonstrate that our bars belong to a short but definite period in the early history of the Roman mint. The rougher bars, while connected on the one hand with ours, are linked on the other to the Aes Rude, extending back indefinitely far into the past[1]).

So much has been written about the bars in proportion to the scantiness of our data, that it is hard to say anything that is both new and true. Our aim will be to select the best of the observations that have already been made and to at-empt to combine them into a surer system than has yet been possible. The wilder guesses shall not be quoted, nor will we wilfully add to the number. We will begin with a summary list of the bars in question; we will then set out the few points that seem to us to be beyond question and will discuss their meaning; finally, we will briefly review that part of the subject, which seems as yet to admit of no certain conclusions.

The bars which we have to discuss are the following:

(1) Eagle front on thunderbolt — Pegasus running left. ROMANOM.

(2) Outside of oval shield — Inside of oval shield.

(3) Sword — Sheath.

(4) Tripod — Corn-Ear; two dots (only known in two fragments).

(5) Trident bound with ribband (lemniscus) — Caduceus bound with ribband.

(6) Tripod — Anchor.

(7) Two cocks opposed; between them, above and below, two stars — Two rostra opposed; between them, above and below, two dolphins.

(8) Bull right — Bull left.

(9) Elephant trotting right — Sow standing left.

[1]) Cp. Haeberlin, Aes Grave, I. pp. 10 ff., 64 ff., 75 ff., 80 ff., 92., 102 f., 133 f., 143 ff.; H. Willers, Num. Zeit. 1904, pp. 1 ff. Italische Bronzebarren aus der letzten Zeit des Rohkupfergeldes.

To these we have now to add a bar, unknown to Haeberlin and now represented by one fragment only;[2])

(10) Branch. ROM[ANOM] — Tendril (incuse).

What sure foundation can we find on which to build up our theories about these fascinating and mysterious objects of early currency?

In the first place, the bars are Italian and, judging from all indications, Roman- at least, in the same wide sense as the Aes Grave, which was either cast for Rome and her allies, or not far removed from her influence. Currency of bronze was characteristic of the natives of Italy and Sicily, as opposed to the silver of the Greeks who settled on their shores. Sicily does not come into the question for our bars; for Sicilian Aes Grave, if it ever got beyond the rude form, has not come down to us. The bars, then, are Italian, and the one legend, ROMANOM (on I and I°), the analogies of certain of the types (e. g. 4—8), and at least one certain historical allusion (9), all point to Rome as the centre. This has been so generally admitted that it would hardly be necessary to emphasize it, had not one really able paper been wrecked on the refusal to recognize the obvious[3]).

Secondly, the bars are of the same kind of bronze as the early bronze coins of Rome[4]) and they bear types of a similar nature to those of that coinage. They can hardly be anything, then, but ingots or bricks *(lateres)*, stamped with the Government's certificate of quality. Currency in a wide sense they certainly are — whether an actual denomination of coin or not we shall have to discuss later.

Thirdly, these bars occupy a place in the history of Roman currency intermediate between the Aes Rude and the cast bronze coins of the Janus-Prow and other series. They are, as we shall sec shortly, the products, *par excellence*, of the first period of the Roman mint.

So much for the certainties on which we may presume to build. Can we persuade the evidence to tell us more than this? Can we decide whether the bars were actually coins and when they began to be cast?

If we glance at the bars in a collection like that of the British Museum or on the plates of Haeberlin's great work, we are at once struck by their general similarity in size, shape and thickness. They give the impression of being standard bars, unlike the rougher (and presumably earlier ones), which show no such regularity. The result is the same when we check over the weights. The average weight is not far removed from 1637 grammes, or six of Haeberlin's ‚Oscan-Latin' pounds.[5]) There is, at least, a suggestion, then, that the bars had an actual normal value of six pounds and were, therefore, in a sense actual coins. Can we adduce any other evidence to support this possibility?

[2]) Notizie degli Scavi, 1928, pp. 83 ff.; found with Aes Grave.

[3]) T. L. Comparetti, Aes Signatum, (Philadelphia, 1919.)

[4]) The bars are too precious to be analysed, but the general truth of the fact is admitted and need not be questioned.

[5]) We do not give exact figures, as they depend upon what we choose to include as full-weight bars; the general result is reliable. Here as always, Haeberlin is our sure guide.

(1) The Roman libral As, when expressed in terms of Greek money, was usually equated with an obol, and, in terms of later Roman coinage, with the sestertius. That is to say, it was regarded as the sixth part of a very heavy Aeginetan drachma, or, alternatively, of a very light didrachm (c. 6.70 grammes) — the actual *nummus* of part of the early Roman coinage.[6]) The later division of the nummus was certainly into ten, as the name, denarius, shows. But the system of the ten bronze *litrae* to one silver *nummus* is characteristically Sicilian or South Italian, not Greek in general. Rome must also have known the division into six obols and may have used it before the other.

(2) In one of the first series of Aes Grave, the ‚Roma' — Wheel (Haeberlin, Das lateinische Schwergeld, Reihe I), multiples of the As, tressis and dupondius, appear, which seem to suggest a unit of six, rather than of ten Asses[7]).

(3) Vitruvius, in a somewhat confused passage (III. I. 8). tells us that the Romans first used a division into six, then a division into ten, then, combining the two, a division into sixteen, the number of Asses in the *aeracius denarius*. We know the two later stages — the division of the denarius first into ten, then into sixteen Asses. Before them both there is room for a division into six obols or Asses.[8])

(4) Pliny (Nat. Hist. XXXIII, 44—45), when he comes to mention the Janus-Prow series, describes its types as those of the sextantal reduction. This, of course, they are not in the ordinary sense of the words; for its As weighs a full pound. But had Pliny perhaps a record, which he failed to understand, of an earlier bronze piece than the libral As, weighing six times as much? It is much in favour of this view, that for him the full libral money was, »signatum ... nota pecudum«, that is to say, our bars, as we shall see below.

It may fairly be claimed, then, that there is a balance of evidence in favour of regarding our bars as money, even despite their cumbrousnes as coins, as they had individually the value of one silver *nummus* each. We might think in the first place of the heavier *nummus* of 7.25 grammes, but the lighter *nummus* of 6.70 grammes might also come into question,, and, in that case, we should have to expect a lighter weight for the bars, or assume, if the weight remained the same, a higher value of silver in terms of bronze. But these are questions for the future; we have no tests delicate enough to try them. But, even if our conclusion is correct and the bars had a definite individual value, it is not to be denied that we are essentially still in the primitive stage of currency, when the scales come into play at every transaction. The ingot has begun to be a coin, without ceasing to be an ingot. Pliny's words (Nat. Hist. XXXIII. 42—43) will still be true: »libralis ... adpendebatur assis, quare aeris

[6]) There was a heavier nummus (7.25 grammes) in three of the »Romano« series of silver

[7]) Tressis and dupondius occur, with decussis, in the first reduction of the Janus-Prow series (Haeberlin, op. cit., pp. 117 ff.); this should represent the point where the old division into six and the new into ten meet.

[8]) Forcellini, Totius Latinitatis Lexicon, I. p. 411, As, 15, tells us that ‚matematici, praesertim Pythagorici, qui senarium numerum omnium perfectissimum esse dicunt, eundem vocant assem et in sex partes dividunt' In the ‚Roma', — Wheel series of Latin Aes Grave the lowest denomination is the sextans, not the uncia.

gravis poena dicta, et adhuc expensa in rationibus dicuntur, item inpendia et dependere, quin et militum stipendia, hoc est stipis pondera, dispensatores, libripendes, qua consuetudine in iis emptionibus quae mancipi sunt etaimnum libra interponitur«.

A more satisfactory explanation of the words, As, Assis, than has yet been offered may now appear possible. Etymologists seem to have reached no agreement. The suggestion that As is derived from Greek εἷς, through Doric forms αἷς, ἄς, seems to lack any ancient authority. Ridgeway's conjecture[9]) that the As was originally a weight expressed in bar form has always been attractive; the difficulty has been to explain how the name passed from bar to round As, and how it came to denote not only ‚standard coin', but ‚unity', in general. As we now see it, the first Roman coin was a bar *(Assis)*, equal to a silver *nummus* or six obols[10]). In 269 B. C. its place was taken by a silver *nummus* and the new bronze unit was the obol, the round As, one sixth of the *nummus* or bar. The name, *Assis*, passed from the old to the new bronze unit — the more readily because the short from, As, suggested the Greek εἷς, Doric ἧς, which, to judge from the evidence quoted in n. 8 above, could be used to describe a unit divided into six parts — the drachma, par excellence, or the libral As, divided into six sextantes[11]).

At what date did our bars begin to be cast? A study of the Roman mint may help us to an answer. The first silver and the first round Asses were issued in 269 B. C.; before that, the scales were still in use for the heavy bronze (Pliny, loc. cit.). But the Roman mint was in existence before that date. Triumvirs of the mint were appointed for the first time in 289 B. C. [12]). Their title may well have been different from those familiar later, *IIIviri aere argento auro flando feriundo* or *III viri monetales;* for there was no question of striking as yet and the mint may not yet bave been in the temple of Jumo Moneta on the Arx. The objections raised by Mommsen against the date are really quite indecisive. He emphasizes the lateness of all other mentions of the office and remarks on its absence from certain lists of magistrates, where he thinks it might have been expected. There is nothing in all this that can tell against a positive tradition, and, as we already know that the Roman mint began to work either in 269 B. C., or not much earlier, the tradition thus receives the support that it needs. Moneyers and mint, then, both came into being in 289 B. C. But what was the function of the mint in its first twenty years, before it struck silver *nummus* or cast round libral Asses? We can now give a positive answer; it was to issue the first attempt at Roman money, only one stage removed from the Aes Rude, heavy bronze in the form of ingots, bearing the mark of state guarantee, of the value of one silver *nummus* apiece.

One apparently formidable difficulty can be at once removed. Aes Signatum is today excessively rare; how then could it have represented the coinage of a state like Rome — even of the Rome of the days before the Pyrrhie War? It is very hard to calculate with any certainty the chances of survival for ancient coins. But for

[9]) The Origin of Metallic Currency and Weight Standards, Cambridge, 1892, pp. 350 ff.; ‚a rod or bar of copper, one foot in length, divided into 12 parts, called inches *(unciae)*'.

[10]) Or diobols, if that be the more exact description. 'Obol' was generally used.

[11]) See again n. above.

heavy and cumbrous objects like our bars we can be sure that it is exceedingly small. When the period of issue is relatively very short nad is succeeded by coinage of a distinct kind, the old issue is doomed to something like complete extinction. Hoards like that of Mazin, which contained a number of fragments of Aes Signatum, together with miscellaneous copper coins of Italy and the West down to the first century B. C., give us a glimpse of the process by which that Aes disappeared back into the Aes Rude, the unformed bronze from which it had sprung. Bars, as such. would seldom be hoarded, for, as soon they began to go out of use as currency, they could at once be put to use again as raw metal.

Our ancient authorities, by a merciful chance, have preserved a definite, though slightly confused, memory of the first period of Roman coinage. Varro tells us that, »aes antiquissimum, quod est flatum pecore est notatum«[13]) and again that it »aut bovem aut ovem aut verbecem habet signum'[14]). Pliny records that ‚Servius rex primus signavit aes, antea rudi usos Timaeus tradit, signatum est nota pecudum, unde et pecunia appellata'[15]). Plutarch tells us that the Romans τῶν νομισμάτων τοῖς παλαιοτάτοις βοῦν ἐπεχαράττον ἢ πρόβατον ἢ σῦν and again that that ἑτέρῳ ... ἐχρήσαντο νομίσματι (i. e. apart from the Janus As) βοῦν ἔχοντι καὶ πρόβατον καὶ ὗν παράσημον[16]). One or two difficulties are obvious. Our bars can have no real relation to Servius Tullius. They have, it is true, types of ox and pig, but not of sheep, and they have a number of other types, not animal. Yet the evidence just quoted seems sufficient to establish a stage of Roman coinage, in which bronze, although no longer ‚Rude', was not yet cast in round Asses, and in which animal types were prominent. To discuss the meaning of Servius Tullius in this context would take us too far from our main subject. The probability is that Timaeus, whe himself flourished in this period, referred to the change at Rome from Aes Rude to Aes Signatum, precisely because it happened within his own experience. The reference to Servius Tullius, whether due to Timaeus or not — and Pliny does not make him responsible for it — certainly neams no more than an appeal to the great tradition of the kingly period to justify a contemporary reform.

Our suggestion, then, is that the first period of the Roman mint was characterized by the issue of bars, bearing types on both sides, of the value of a silver *nummus* each. As mint for this first period only Rome seems to come into question; it was only in 265 B. C. that Italian quaestorships were instituted, and, without this financial organization, it is hard to conceive of local mints of Roman coin in Italy. But, even if the bars are definitely characteristic of the period from 289 to 269 B. C., it does not necessarily follow that they ceased to be issued in the latter year. If this proves to be the case, — and the types will in some cases suggest it — we shall not only have to extend the possible length in time of the issue, but also its distribution in space, inasmuch as local mints of the Italian quaestorships may claim their share beside Rome.

[12]) Pomponius in Digest., 1. 2. 2. 30. (ed. Mommsen); cp. Livy, Epitome, XI.

[13]) De re rustica, II. 1. 9.

[14]) De vita pop. Rom. I. i.

[15]) Nat. Hist. XXXIII, 43 ff.

[16]) Quaestiones Romanae, 41, vol. VII, p. 112 R.

We now reach the purely theoretical part of our paper — the study of the types and the dates and places of origin that they may suggest. Comparetti (op. cit.) was surely justified in claiming that the bars were ‚medallic' — as Roman they could hardly fail to be — but he himself relaxed his grasp of their Roman origin and lost himself in speculations about the cities of Magna Graecia. Haeberlin brought the bars into his rigid system, one bar to each silver didrachm and round As, but, even so, he was left with two redundant bars, ‚commemorating historical events'. Although his system has met with reasonable criticism and can hardly be maintained in its entirety, some of his connexions will appear to stand the test.

We now come to the individual bars in detail;

(1) Eagle on thunderbolt — Pegasus running left. ROMANOM.

The eagle, ‚minister fulminis ales', is a true Roman type, symbolical of Jupiter Optimus Maximus of the Capitol. It is, of course, common on Greek coins, too, as symbol of Zeus. The type, however, does not occur in any of the series of Aes Grave; the thunderbolt, without the eagle, appears on the triens in the ‚Roma' — ‚Roma' series (Haeberlin, Latin Aes Grave, II) and in the Janus — Mercury series (Haeberlin, IV and VI). Pegasus, the heavenly steed, is associated with Apollo as Sun-god, and, through the coinage of Corinth and her colonies, with Minerva. He too may be thought of as a thunder-bearer. The type occurs on the semis of the Apollo-Apollo series (Haeberlin, III and V). There is no good reason for making him a symbol of Campania (Haeberlin) or Carthage (Milani); in both cases, other types have a much better right to rank as symbols[17]), and the legend, ROMANOM,[18]) seems to claim him for a Roman context.

As neither type, in the exact form in which it appears here, can be paralleled on coins of this period, we have no clue to the exact occasion of the bar. It is, of course, possible that the symbolism is quite general and that no topical reference need be sought.

(2) and (3). Outside of oval shield — Inside of oval shield.

Sword — Sheath.

These two bars have, not unnaturally, been associated with the. Aes Grave of Ariminum (with obverse, Head of Gaul), where a long shield is the reverse of the quincunx, a sword and sheath of the quatrunx. Haeberlin has remarked, with full justice, that our shield and sword are unlike those of Ariminum in several important respects and that, therefore, if those are Gallic, these are not, but, presumably, the normal shield and sword of the Roman army of the time. This does not, however, dispose of the connexion with Ariminum. It is the selection of shield and sword, of whatever pattern, as coin-types, that is rare and remarkable, If a Roman mint was in operation at Ariminum, after the foundation of the colony in 269 B. C., such bars as ours might well be its products. It might be possible in this way to follow Haeberlin's lead and associate our bars with one or both of the silver didrachms, with the young head of Mars on obverse.

[17]) Man-headel bull for Campania, horse or horse's head for Carthage.

[18]) Often taken as genitive plural, but perhaps more probably neuter singular (nominative or accusative), »Roman« (»Aes«).

(4) and (6). Tripod — Corn-Ear (two dots).

Tripod — Anchor.

The tripod, as Haeberlin has already recognized, is the symbol of the prophetic Apollo and must refer either directly to him or to the Sibylline Books of Fate. But against any close connexion of the bars with the two Apollo-Apollo series (Haeberlin, III and V) is the lack of any correspondence between the corn-ear and anchor and the other types of those series[19]).

Should we look for special occasions for these bars, instances of consultation of the Sibylline Books within our period would demand first attention. The evidence, however, seems to be almost nil.

(5) Trident with ribband — Caduceus with ribband.

The caduceus is the symbol of Mercury, the trident of Neptune (or, at least, of some sea-god); the ribbands are tokens of victory. So far, all is satisfactory and plain.

Haeberlin linked the bar to the heavy Janus-Mercury series (his No. VI), and, if we may add one point to those that he has already made, the connexion becomes really strong. Janus himself, for whatever reason, is closely associated with the naval type of the prow. The young Janiform head, which probably represents Fontus, son of Janus, god of fountains and waters, maintains the association with the sea. The similar head, under a broad hat, on the Aes Grave of Volaterrae, has as one of its reverses, a dolphin[20]).

There is clearly some general suggestion of trade prosperity linked with naval victory or, at least, with predominance at sea. If an exact occasion must be sought, we might select a victory like that of Mylae.

(7) Two cocks, two stars — Two rostra, two dolphins.

A bar as interesting as it is obscure. The close parallelism of the two sides is obvious. The two birds are opposed, just as are the rostra, and both are separated by symbols, the stars and dolphins, above and below. The rostra and dolphins speak plainly of fleets in action at sea, presumably of a naval battle. What of the birds on the other side? Haeberlin and others have seen in them the sacred ‚pulli', feeding, — the regular omen before battle, disregard of which led to the disaster of Drepana. But, if this is the case, the parallelism of the feeding birds and the opposed rostra becomes merely formal; fighting cocks would make a far better balance. The star is associated with the cock on a series of ‚alliance' coins in bronze, struck by Cales, Suessa and other cities. That coinage has not yet been interpreted with any certainty, but a good case can be made out for regarding it as a special issue, struck at one centre for the account of the different cities that took part in the occupation of the ‚ager Gallicus'. The mint would then be Ariminum in the period after 269 B. C. The cock is also the reverse of the biunx of the Aes Grave of Hatria.

The bar would seem to belong to the period of great Roman activity at sea, beginning circa 261 B. C. If the birds are really the sacred ‚pulli', the reference might be to one of the great naval battles, Mylae, Ecnomus or the Aegates Insulae. If, on

[19]) Unless the barley-corn on the uncia can rank as such.

[20]) This might seem to be a Melcarth-Melicertes type; but the similarity of form and the connexion with the sea remain in any case.

the other hand, they are fighting cocks, there may be some reference to the ‚ager Gallicus' — to the port of Hatria, for instance, and the reference to naval warfare would be more general.[21])

(8). Bull right — Bull left.

The ancients evidently interpreted the bull as representative of the ‚pecus', that gave a name to ‚pecunia'. Modern scholars have preferred to think of the bull as the symbol of Italy (‚Vitelliu' — ‚vitulus') or, perhaps, of Samnium, in particular. The two explanations need not exclude one another, and, as we have good reason for believing in a fixed valuation of oxen and sheep in terms of bronze, preceding coined money, the relation of ‚pecus' to, ‚pecunia' seems to be worth retaining. The bar is, in that case, probably the first of the whole series.

(9). Elephant trotting right — Sow standing left.

The elephant is of the Indian type, one of the elephants of Pyrrhus, then, not of the Carthaginians, which were African. The bar tells eloquently of the flight of the elephants at the grunting of sows, which is said to have taken place at the battle of Asculum. Haeberlin attributes the bar to the year 273 B. C., when elephants, taken at Beneventum, 275 B. C., were paraded in Rome. The bar would commemorate the introduction of the ‚Luca bos' to the Roman public. There seems to be no reason to try to improve on this convincing explanation. Haeberlin, however, calls this the latest of the bars; it now appears to be the earliest work of the Roman mint, to which a close date can be assigned, even if the Bull bar (no. 8) probably preceded it.

(10) Branch ROM[ANOM] — Tendril.

The recurrence of the signature ROM . . . is the chief point of interest. All that can be said of the types is that they seem to lie nearer to the earlier rougher bars, with pattern-types, than to the other bars of our series.

It will be clear to our readers how much remains uncertain — perhaps is destined to remain uncertain for ever. Under these circumstances, the delimitation of the known from the unknown, as we have attempted it in this paper, may appear to be the best service that can be rendered to the study of Aes Signatum.

Our debt to Haeberlin and the other scholers who have thrown light on this dark subject will be Arions to all who care to consult whit thrag have written.

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[21]) If it were not so late, the date of the battle of Telamon would be an attractive one; it was won by joint naval and military action against the invading Gauls.

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