

# Forgery on the Nile

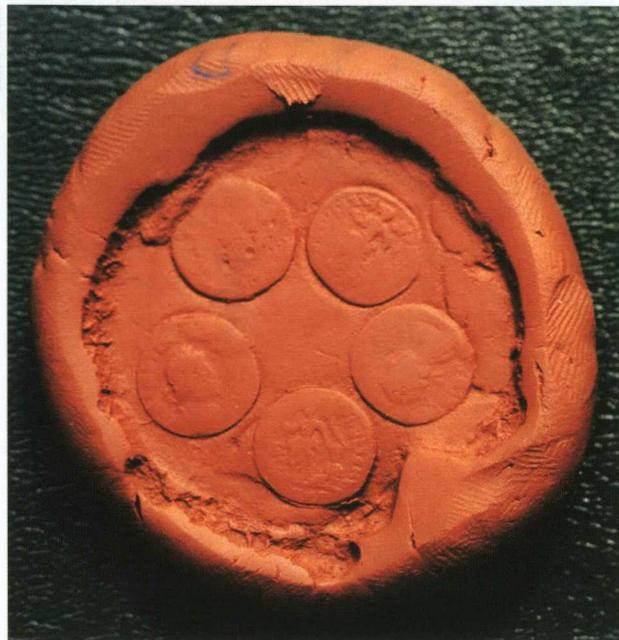
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**Ancient counterfeiters did not just copy coins of high denominations, made of gold and silver, but also forged “pennies,” i.e. low-value coins made of bronze, on a large scale. How were such imitations produced in late Roman Egypt, and did such forgers get away scot-free?**

Forgery has a long history stretching back to ancient times. Ancient counterfeiters would prepare their own dies to mint coins, or cast copies using clay moulds they had prepared themselves. Sometimes they even used dies taken from an official mint. In lieu of the correct metal alloy, they would employ an alloy bearing a higher content of a much less valuable metal, such as cheap lead, which had added benefits in terms of its malleability and relatively low melting temperature.

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Plasticine impression of a clay mould for casting coins, bearing visible impressions of bronze coins dated from 376–378 to 392–395. Collection of the British Museum in London (Reg. No 1906–11–3–2810, item No 281)

The practice of producing imitations of silver denarii in the Roman republic was unlawful under a law passed around 81 BC: *lex Cornelia de falsis*. Forgery thus carried the punishment of banishment for free men, death for slaves. Yet *lex Cornelia* did not mention the copying of bronze coins – perhaps because their issues had been suspended in that period. During the early Empire, however, bronze coins began to be emitted under the supervision of the Senate. The right to mint gold and silver coins belonged to the Caesar, yet he also undoubtedly had an influence over the issue of bronze coinage. Also during this period, the provinces of the Roman empire likewise gained the right to produce their own bronze issues.

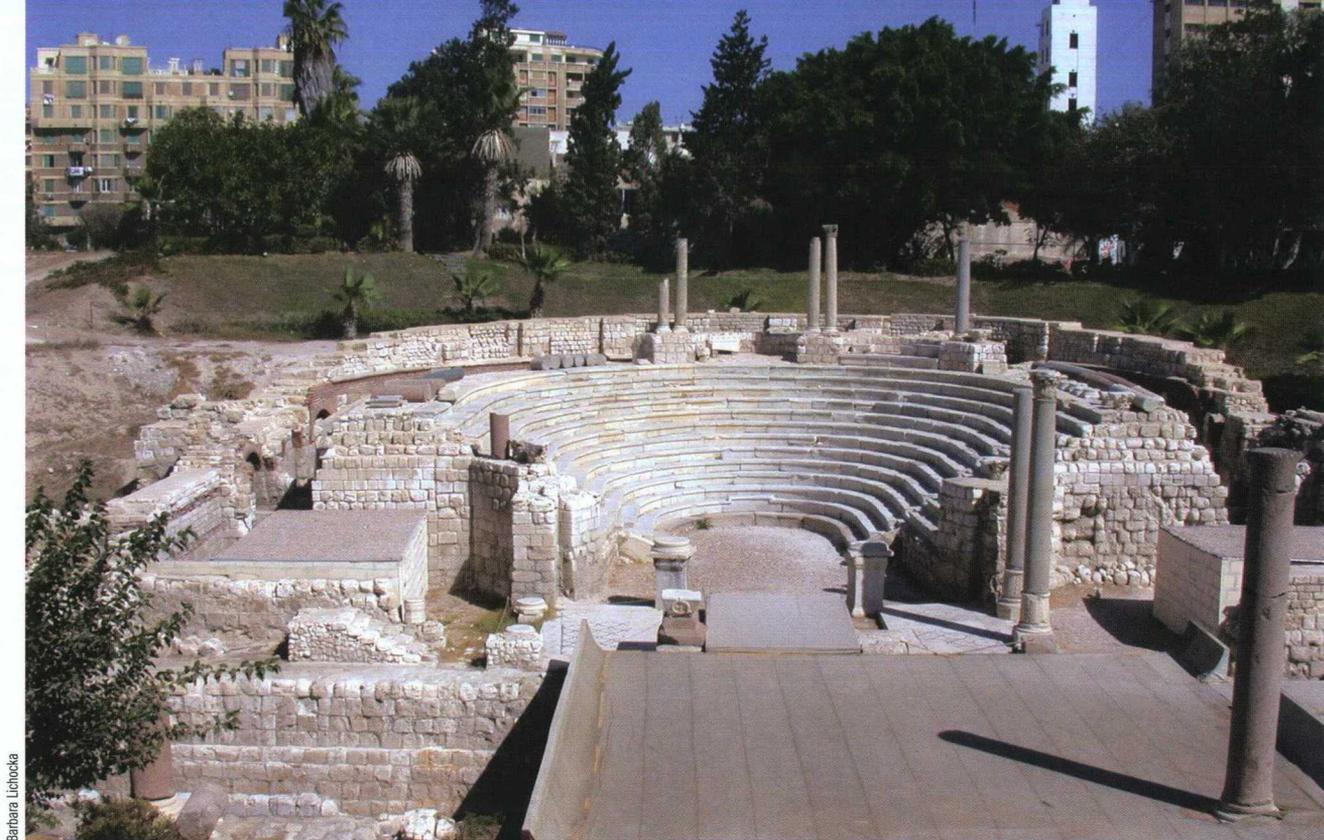
And so, while the falsification of gold and silver coins was explicitly treated as an offense, the sources from the early empire period say nothing about counterfeiting of bronze coins. Regulations concerning bronzes are only found in the late Roman legal acts compiled into the *Codex Theodosianus*, published in 438.

## Clandestine workshops

But in quite a few provinces, unofficial workshops were already manufacturing false coins. In Egypt, the casting of copied forgeries developed on an extraordinarily large scale. At one site alone, near the military camp of Dionysias, approximately 15,000 terracotta moulds have been found, bearing the impressions of *folles*, some 2 cm in diameter base-metal coins, minted under the reign of Diocletian, Licinius I, and Constantine I. Although some researchers feel that the proximity of the garrison indicates that the casting activities in Dionysias could not have gone unnoticed by military leaders, and therefore had to be at least tolerated, it is nevertheless hard to conjecture that the Roman administrative authorities responsible for monetary policy gave any official consent to so many copies being made and placed into circulation.

Similar moulds have also been found in other places: more than 100 in Oxyrhynchus and nearly 3,000 in Hermopolis Magna. They were used to cast coins from series ranging in date from 308–310 to 351–355. These were copies of relatively small value coins, which could be quite easily placed into circulation.

The same thing can be said of the vast quantities of later-dated small coins 0.7–1.2 cm in diameter excavated by the Polish-Egyptian archeological and architectural mission at Kom el-Dikka – a Late Roman district of housing, public baths, and a so-called theater, located in the



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center of the city of Alexandria. The microstructure of the coins shows that they had not been struck, and that means they did not come from a legal production workshop.

### The know-how of forgery

What technology was employed in producing such forgeries? Coins were impressed onto both surfaces of wet clay moulds, which were bound together in sets – like a pile of pancakes – so as to produce a larger number of copies with each casting process. Only the top and bottom moulds in each set had impressions of coins only on one surface. Hot metal was next poured into the connected moulds through small depressions. They were then left alone to be cooled, before the copies were extracted.

Copies were made of various types of coins in current circulation. Such moulds thus provide an excellent source of information about where the coins then in use in Egypt came from and how long they remained in circulation. The time-span encompassed by the impressed coins made on one of the moulds preserved in the British Museum in London is very wide, as the earliest coin copied can be dated to 353–361, the latest to 425–455.

### Taken at face value?

Such casts were smaller and lighter than their prototypes. Moreover, the copies found at archeological sites are predominantly of poor quality; some even wholly lack images on their obverse or reverse. Yet even such hard-to-read examples are telling, demonstrating the large scale on which forgery was practiced. It is possible that during the late-Roman period, not much attention was paid to the weight standard of coinage or the quality of the coin designs. These were coins of small denomination which

had long been in use, and it was natural for their surface to have become worn. It is possible that any larger-scale transactions involved payment passed in pouches (the initial meaning of the Latin word *foliis* being “pouch”). It was the weight of a pouch that truly mattered.

Copies were produced in at least several workshops strewn throughout the province of Egypt, but the same technology was used everywhere. There can be no doubt that the forgers had an excellent grasp of the properties of metal, and it is possible that official mint employees were involved in producing imitations. Such a suspicion finds support in the *Theodosian Code*, although previous legal regulations had also instituted penalties for dishonest mint employees. Most evidently, however, the threat of being dispossessed of property or banished, or having other sanctions imposed, including against the individual in whose home coins were forged, did not provide a sufficient deterrent. Most likely, the death penalty was rarely employed against forgers of bronze coins. Perhaps the administration was so tied down with extracting and collecting numerous taxes, that it did not put much effort into punishing those who forged bronze coins, only useful in small, day-to-day transactions. ■

#### Further reading:

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