

COLLECTIONNEURS CÉLÈBRES

GLORIA MORA

RAFAEL CERVERA Y ROYO (1828–1903)



Fig. 1. Portrait of Rafael Cervera at the Royal Academy of Medicine (Madrid)

Rafael Cervera was a Spanish physician and politician who in the second half of the nineteenth century assembled one of the most important collections of ancient and Visigothic coins of Spain. This collection was acquired by the American millionaire and Hispanist Archer M. Huntington, who in

1904 donated it along with the rest of his collections (library, painting and sculpture, works of art and archaeological objects) to the institution, which he had founded in New York, The Hispanic Society of America.

The following text summarizes a broader investigation that will appear soon in the definitive study of the Cervera Collection by M.P. García-Bellido and W. E. Metcalf, *La moneda antigua de Hispania en la colección Cervera* (Madrid, CSIC-Polifemo, 2014).

Rafael Cervera y Royo was born in Valencia on October 24, 1828 and died in Barcelona on February 7, 1903. Between 1843 and 1850 he studied Medicine and Surgery at the University of Valencia. He then moved to Paris to specialize in ophthalmology and ophthalmic surgery. He was an assistant in the clinics of Jules Sichel and Louis-Auguste Desmarres, the first specialists in this field in France. In January 1854 he received his doctorate at the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Madrid with a thesis entitled *Origin, evolution and state of medicine* (published in 1856).

On his return to Spain, Cervera established himself in Madrid to practice his profession with dedication and remarkable success as surgeon and ophthalmologist. Historians of Medicine consider him one of the founders of this specialty in Spain. In 1863 he entered the Royal Academy of Medicine, and between 1877 and 1893 he directed the Ophthalmic Institute founded in 1872 (**Fig. 1**). Ophthalmology was then a new specialty in Spain and its practitioners tended to achieve great social prestige and high economic level, as reflected in the literature of the time (for instance in some novels of Benito Pérez Galdós). Cervera certainly earned enough income to be able to afford a collection of such quality as noted by Antonio Vives y Escudero in the prologue of *La Moneda Hispánica* (Madrid, 1926).

In addition to the practice of ophthalmology, Cervera was devoted to politics after the overthrow of Queen Isabel II in 1868, as a member of the Federal Republican Party. Until the mid- 1890s he held various positions: Madrid city councilor, congressman and senator from the provinces of Murcia and the Balearic Islands and from the Royal Academy of Medicine. During these mandates he was actively involved in the debates for the defense of academic freedom, education and awareness. He became vice president of the Chamber elected in the Constituent Assembly in 1873–1874 and member of the commission responsible for drafting the Federal Constitution, which was signed on July 17, 1873. In 1891 he was one of the founders of the Republican Center Party (“Partido Centralista”), which promulgated the establishment of the Federal Republic in Spain, universal suffrage and the Iberian Union of Spain, Portugal and Gibraltar.



Fig. 2. Drachma from Emporion. Early third century BC

Cervera also belonged to the most important cultural institutions related to the “regeneracionista” program in the last third of the nineteenth century. As many doctors and professionals, patrons and collectors of the time, he was a member of the Scientific and Literary Ateneo of Madrid (Ateneo Científico y Literario), the Spanish Anthropological Society (Sociedad Antropológica Española) and the Free Institution of Education (Institución Libre de Enseñanza). These societies defended freedom of thought and independence from the state, church and political parties, and were a mixture of various social forces (university professors, writers, professionals, bankers, politicians and Army officers) united by their liberal ideology.

In 1901, already very ill, Cervera moved his residence to Barcelona, where he died on February 7, 1903, at the age of 74. He had made a will in Madrid on March 9, 1898 before the notary Joaquín Costa Martínez, one of his friends and one of the most important personalities of the *regeneracionista* movement at the end of the century. This will sheds light on his magnificent collections of paintings and coins, and on his friendships with two main characters in these fields: the painter Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida and the numismatist and archaeologist Antonio Vives y Escudero, whom he appointed as advisers to his heir, his sister Carmen, in case she decided to sell the collections. Except for two pictures located at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Havana, Cuba (one of them a portrait of Cervera by Sorolla), we know nothing of this art collection but we suppose that it must have been of high quality judging from those of other collectors from the same intellectual and social standing.

With respect to numismatics, Cervera belonged to the large group of independent professionals who in the second half of the nineteenth century formed important collections of coins: doctors and pharmacists, men of



Fig. 3. Denarius from i.k.a.l.e.n.s.ke.n. Mid-second century BC

law, brokers, businessmen, bankers and traders, army officers, many of them were also important politicians. They acquired coins through consolidated exchange networks between amateurs and professionals, belonged to scientific associations such as Numismatic Centers in Madrid, Barcelona and Seville, and attended auctions that were scheduled in the working environment of the art and antiquities trade in Paris, Rome, Milan, Berlin, London and New York. They also read the catalogs written by numismatists and prestigious magazines like the *Bulletins of Numismatics* published by Valentín Gil in Madrid and by Alejandro Cerdá in Valencia, or the *Bulletin of the Royal Academy of History* and the *Memorial Numismático Español* de Álvaro Campaner.

According to contemporary sources, in Spain in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there were about 500 numismatic collections of individuals, dealers and institutions, of which only thirty had important specimens that were used by the great numismatists of the time to write their works, such as Antonio Delgado, Arthur Engel, Celestino Pujol and Camps, Alois Heiss, Manuel Rodríguez de Berlanga, Jacobo Zobel de Zangróniz, Antonio Vives or Pío Beltrán Villagrasa. Thus, the aforementioned Vives's *La Moneda Hispánica* (written between 1894 and 1920) is an essential reference for the composition and formation mechanisms of these collections and their owners, thanks to the comments that illustrate the specimens selected for their uniqueness, good state of conservation or beauty (Fig. 2). In addition to the collection from the National Archaeological Museum (founded in 1867 with the royal collections) and the Instituto Valencia de Don Juan (founded in 1916 from the private collections of Guillermo de Osma, Earl consort of Valencia de Don Juan), Vives studied the most important private collections of the time. The first one, because it contained some very rare coins, is that of Rafael Cervera, also the collections of



Fig. 4. Drachma from a.r.s.e. Second century BC

Mariano Roca de Togores y Carrasco, first Marquis de Molins (1817–1889), politician and member of the Royal Academy of History, Manuel Vidal Quadras y Ramón (1818–1894), a wealthy banker of Barcelona, José Salamanca y Mayol, Marquis of Salamanca (1811–1883), the banker and Maecenas Pablo Bosch y Barrau (1862–1915), who bequeathed his collection of coins, medals and painting to the Prado Museum, the dealer Eduardo Sánchez Fernández de la Cotera, of Seville, and Ramón Siscar y Montoliu (1830–1889), philologist and corresponding member of the Academy of History in Barcelona.

From the comments of Vives and of other numismatists, we can consider Rafael Cervera as a model collector of the second half of the nineteenth century: he was a liberal prestigious professional with political ambitions and a big income spending his free time and resources to collect works of art and coins, whose collection was the basis for the first studies of numismatics in Spain. Probably he started to buy coins during his stay in Paris as it was traditionally a very popular hobby among medical professionals in France. We know that he continued to add to his collection until the end of his life, as shown by the acquisition of coins from the Treasure called La Capilla, a group of Visigothic coins discovered on August 21, 1891 near Carmona (Seville). Arthur Engel wrote in a letter to Jorge Bonsor, dated in Seville January 13, 1900: “J’ai vu le Colonel Vidaurre, qui a malheureusement vendu au Dr. Cervera, de Madrid, le petit lot de monnaies qu’il avait”. Thanks largely to these coins purchased by Cervera, George C. Miles, Chief Curator of The American Numismatic Society, could claim that his institution had the best collection of Visigothic coins in the world.

According to Vives, Cervera bought entire collections through the dealer Valentín Gil y García in Madrid: the Francisco Otín y Duaso and the Celestino Pujol y Camps’s collections, which was the “crowning”



Fig. 5. As from Caesaraugusta. Tiberius (AD 14–37)

because it contained only “Roman Iberian coins”, and a selection of the famous collection of José M^a de Vera in Seville. Also he was able to acquire the collection of Joaquín Pujol y Santo (the Celestino Pujol’s father), Antonio Filpo y Silva, priest of Seville and then of Granada, and Miguel Tenorio de Castilla, Andalusian politician and writer who was private secretary of Isabel II. In addition he acquired coins during his travels through Spain and Europe, some of them motivated by his political and professional activities. So he was able to form an important collection of about 2000 ancient (Greek, Carthaginian, Roman and Iberian) and Visigothic coins of Spain, including exceptional specimens like the coin of Iudila from Emerita, that belonged to general Chinchilla, or the i.k.a.l.e.n.s.ke.n denarius with a southern Iberian legend, purchased from Alejandro Rivadeneira (n^o 779 in the García-Bellido and Metcalf Catalogue) (Fig. 3).

Cervera’s preference for collecting certain series of Hispanic coins – Greek and Roman coins minted in the Peninsula, Hispano-Carthaginian, autochthonous and Visigothic issues – was not just due to random taste, but reflected the intellectual concerns of the institutions involved in the scientific and social regeneration of Spain, to which he belonged, especially an interest in documenting material culture and in the writings of the ancient inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula, in order to protect the national heritage. Indeed, while the collections of the early nineteenth century consisted mainly of Roman coins, those of the second half of the century focused on native coinages: Iberian, Celtiberian, Visigothic and Islamic. In this regard, and in line with his federalist and *paniberista* ideology, Cervera’s collection reflects the concerns of the time for the history of the ancient peoples of the Peninsula and the search for the roots of Spain in the pre-Roman and the Visigoth world, subjects that also appear in contemporary historiography (Fig. 4). This interest that can also be detected in France and Germany,

may be related to the rise of studies of the pre-Roman peoples from their coinages that were introduced in Spain by direct and indirect disciples of Theodor Mommsen like Emil Hübner, Manuel Rodríguez de Berlanga and Jacobo Zobel de Zangróniz.

A year before he died, Cervera sold his collection in Paris to the American collector and benefactor Archer M. Huntington, as the buyer reported to his friend and fellow in the excavations in Italica, Jorge Bonsor, in a letter dated March 8, 1902: “Possibly you have heard that I purchased the collection of Cervera and Codera coins in Paris”. As M.P. García-Bellido thought by comparison with what happened to Vives’s collection of ancient bronzes, the sale must have been made through Vives himself, friend and informer of Huntington in the business of buying and selling Spanish antiquities, and Cervera’s friend and adviser according to the aforementioned will. Perhaps in this case the intermediary was the same antiquarian who facilitated the sale of Vives’s bronzes, J. G. Meunier, or perhaps Étienne Bourgey, both reputable dealers. The transaction was announced with a simple note in the *Bulletin International de Numismatique* in 1902.

Archer M. Huntington (1870–1955), adopted son of the American railroad magnate and collector Collis P. Huntington, dedicated his life to the study of Hispanic culture and to forming an impressive collection of paintings, sculptures, books and manuscripts, coins and artistic and archaeological artifacts, all of Spanish origin (**Fig. 5**). That interest earned him awards from the Spanish Royal Family and nominations to the Royal Academies of Language, Fine Arts and History. To house his collections and library he founded The Hispanic Society of America in 1904.

The Huntington Collection of coins consisted of 37.895 coins of very high quality that represented all coinages struck in the Iberian Peninsula and the Spanish possessions overseas from the time of the Greek colonization to the independence of the Latin American republics in the nineteenth century. In 1904 Huntington donated the collection to the Hispanic Society, between 1946 and 1948 he decided to transfer it on loan to The American Numismatic Society, an institution, which he sponsored and of which he was president from 1910 until his death in 1955, when a second lot of 8.000 coins was added. On December 15, 2011 The Hispanic Society of America decided to sell in an auction sealed bid, through Sotheby’s New York, this collection, unique in the world that it had kept intact for over a century and it is now dispersed. Thus the vast collection assembled by Archer M. Huntington is lost and with it that of Rafael Cervera, one of the best and most complete ever assembled in the second half of the nineteenth century in Spain and in the world.