

LES GRANDS NUMISMATES

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BARCLAY VINCENT HEAD (1844–1914)¹

Barclay Head has long held a central place in my personal numismatic pantheon, and my interest in his career has developed even more in recent years while I have been working on the third edition of his great compendium on ancient Greek coinage, *Historia Numorum*. The first two editions of this book were published in 1886 and 1911 respectively, and it is a measure of Head's achievement that it remains in many parts the standard work on Greek coinage. My own labours on the third edition have certainly enhanced my admiration for the scope and depth of Head's earlier editions, and I wanted to know more about his wider contribution to the development of Greek numismatics.

Who, then, was Barclay Vincent Head, and what were his contributions to numismatic scholarship? Those are of course the starting points for my enquiry, but I want also to introduce themes that are of wider interest and concern. How did Head's work fit into the trends of contemporary classical and numismatic scholarship? To what extent did he follow trends, to what extent did he innovate, break new ground? In my investigations so far I have been fortunate to have had access to a rich source of material in the archives of the British Museum.² This has shed a great deal of light on the "public" side of Head's career, and there is almost certainly more archive material in existence that could further illuminate other aspects of his work, for example, his international standing as a numismatist.³ Up to now, however, I have not tracked down any of the more personal material, letters and so on, that would give us some insight into what Head himself thought he was doing. For that we still have to rely on the evidence of his own works, what he says in them, and the methodologies he adopts.

To begin, then, with the basics of Head's career. He was born in 1844, in Ipswich, where he attended the excellent Queen Elizabeth Grammar School between midsummer 1857 and midsummer 1861. The Head Master of the

1 This is a slightly shortened version of an article already published in *DAIS PHILĒSISTEPHANOS. Studies in Honour of Professor STAFFAN FOGELMARK Presented on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday, 12 April 2004*, P. Sandin, M. Wifstrand Schiebe (edd.), Uppsala 2004, pp. 418–34.

2 I am grateful to Christopher Date and Gary Thorn of the British Museum Central Archives for showing me the material on Head in their care, and also to Mary Hinton, Librarian of the Department of Coins and Medals in the BM, for allowing me extended use of a remarkable scrapbook of reviews and notices of Head's work.

3 Andrew Burnett informs me that letters from Head (and also from his colleague Reginald Stuart Poole) to Friedrich Imhoof-Blumer are held in Winterthur.

school while Head was there was Hubert A. Holden, late Fellow and Tutor of Trinity College, Cambridge and editor of *Aristophanes*. So there can be little doubt that the young Head had a thorough grounding in the Greek and Latin classics. After leaving school Head pursued his studies for nine months or so with a private tutor, who had in fact taught him at school. Surprisingly, perhaps, he did not go on to University, but in October 1862, at the age of 18, he applied to the British Museum, initially, it seems, for a vacancy as an Assistant in the Department of Printed Books.⁴

Some documentation survives showing how Head went about applying for this post, for example, his actual Application Form, dated October 28 1862. Apart from the bare details of his education that I have already summarised, he mentions only that “I have past (*sic*) the examination of the University of Oxford, as a senior candidate, and have been declared an Associate in Arts.” I need to investigate further what exactly that signifies. I have assumed above that he was already proficient in Latin and Greek, but what other skills had he acquired, for example, in modern European languages? There are in addition several surviving references on his behalf. His Head Master, for example, comments on his “uniform diligence and good conduct”, and goes on to say that he “would make an useful officer in any establishment where punctuality, perseverance and tact are required”. His private tutor concurs: “He pursued his studies with the most commendable assiduity and earnestness.” Already the qualities in Head that would be remarked on and would stand him in good stead in his later scholarly career have been appreciated: as a scholar, the accuracy of his work and his eye for detail; in his relations with others, his courtesy and probity.

At some point, either Head or his family must have approached the local Member of Parliament for advice on the procedures for appointment to the British Museum. A letter in the BM archive dated August 22 1862 explains those procedures to the said M.P., Mr. Western Wood. “When vacancies arise, eligible candidates are sought for, all applications are considered and examined, and the candidate appearing to possess the best qualifications undergoes an examination of the Civil Service Commissioners.” The letter goes on to recommend that Mr. Head should call at the BM, request to see the Chief Librarian, and ask to have his name inserted in the list of candidates. The Librarian would inform him of the duties of the post.

There is no further evidence on the circumstances of Head’s initial appointment to the BM, except that in February 1864 he was appointed as a Second Class Assistant in the Department of Coins and Medals, at a salary of £150 per annum. The Keeper of Coins and Medals at that time was William Vaux, and one of the three First Class Assistants was Reginald Stuart

4 A separate Department of Coins and Medals was formed in 1861, just before Head was making enquiries and applying to the BM.

Poole. In September 1870 Vaux retired, leaving a vacancy in the Keepership. By December that year Poole had been appointed Keeper, leaving in turn a vacancy for the Assistant Keepership. By March in the next year 1871 that post had been filled by Head.

What had Head done during his first seven years or so at the BM to fit him for such a post, so young? We are fortunate to have a very full account, from Head himself, of his activities and the qualifications he had acquired for the post of Assistant Keeper. We also have a number of letters of reference on his behalf.

The answer to the question “What had Head done?” can be briefly stated: “A very great deal in the time available to him.” As Head himself remarked in his letter of application: “I am fully aware that the time during which I have been employed by the Trustees is shorter than the term of service which an Assistant has generally to go through in the Museum before his promotion to so high a rank.” Head’s work had in fact ranged throughout the entire collection of the Department of Coins and Medals. He summarised his achievements in a letter dated November 5, 1870 and addressed to the Archbishop of Canterbury, at that time Chairman of the trustees of the BM. “In the Greek, Medieval and Modern, and English series, almost all the registration and incorporation of the acquisitions made during the last seven years ... , in all about 11,000 coins, have been done by me, together with the incorporation of the Imperial Greek series consisting of some 10,000 coins, with that of the Autonomous coins. I have also worked under Mr. Poole’s direction upon the Catalogue of Greek Coins, and have carried out a more accurate arrangement of certain important portions of the Greek series.”

A pause here for comment. Registration of objects and their incorporation into the existing collections are fundamental to the work of a museum, but here we have in addition references to the “arrangement” and “cataloguing” of the coins. What is the best way to make known a museum’s collection to the wider scholarly world and to the general public? For the BM’s collection of Greek coins in the 1870s the answer to that question was a plan to publish a Catalogue of the Museum’s holdings. Head contributed to the first two volumes of this massive enterprise, on the Greek coins of Italy and of Sicily (both in collaboration with R. S. Poole and P. Gardner; the two volumes appeared in 1873 and 1876 respectively), and by the time the twenty-seventh volume was published in 1914 he had been responsible for a further nine volumes: Thrace (1877, with Percy Gardner), Macedonia (1879), Central Greece (1884), Attica, Megaris and Aegina (1888), Corinth and her Colonies (1889), Ionia (1892), Caria (1897), Lydia (1902), Phrygia (1906). All this energetic cataloguing stimulated further activity in Britain (for example, George Macdonald’s *Catalogue of the Greek Coins in the Hunterian Collection*, three volumes between 1899 and 1905; S. W. Grose’s *Catalogue of the McClean Collection of Greek Coins*, three volumes between

1923 and 1929; L. Forrer's *The Weber Collection*, three volumes between 1922 and 1929), but attempts to emulate it on the continent petered out after only a few volumes. The work of Head and his colleagues at the BM is an inspiration to those who undertake work in order to complete it.

I shall return to the theme of international co-operation or competition, and also to Head's work on Greek coinage, but let me first complete my brief survey of his work in the BM before his appointment as Assistant Keeper in 1871. In the Roman series he was entrusted with the arrangement and cataloguing of the brass portion of the Collection of the Bank of England. He took up the Anglo-Saxon portion of the English series as a special study, taking particular care over the arrangement and cataloguing of the coins of Edward the Confessor. In the oriental series he registered and incorporated a large part of the Chinese and Japanese acquisitions (under the direction of Dr. Birch) and obtained a good knowledge of Parthian and Bactrian coins. In the series of English and Foreign medals he was responsible for the registration and incorporation of all the acquisitions since his initial appointment, and the chronological arrangement of the Royal Collection, in all about 6,000 coins.

In addition to and arising from his work in the BM Head had begun to publish. His first two articles, in the *Numismatic Chronicle* for 1867 and 1868, were on Anglo-Saxon coins, but the 1868 *Chronicle* also contained a contribution on the coinage of Ilion, the first of a long series of articles on Greek coinage.⁵

For all these activities of cataloguing and publication, Head received some glowing testimonials both to his academic achievements and to his personal qualities. His boss Reginald Stuart Poole summed up his "special qualifications": "good knowledge of archaeology and numismatics; practical acquaintance with the collections, especially the Greek and English series; great accuracy and delicacy of work; knowledge of how labour may be economized without detriment to the Antiquities Department." Qualifications that would obviously be valued nowadays too.

Thus it was that Head, at the age of 27/28, was established as Assistant Keeper to Poole, and ready for the next stage in his career at the British Museum. He became Keeper in the Department of Coins and Medals on Poole's retirement in 1893, and continued in that post until his own retirement in 1906. He died in 1914.

5 The *Numismatic Chronicle* had started life as the *Numismatic Journal* in 1836, the year of the foundation of the Numismatic Society in London (from 1904 the Royal Numismatic Society). In the 1830s and 1840s numismatics had begun to break out from being a mainly aristocratic preserve, not only in Britain but also on the continent. The *Revue de la numismatique française* first appeared in 1836 (from 1838 *Revue numismatique*), and the *Revue de la numismatique belge* in 1842.

How might one characterize Head's achievement in and contribution to his chosen field of Greek numismatics? We can begin to explore that question under three headings: first, his cataloguing activities, to which some reference has already been made; secondly, his studies of individual mints and their relationship to the cataloguing activity; and thirdly, his massive overview of Greek coinage, *Historia Numorum*, referred to earlier and still the first port of call if one wants to check a reference to a coin that one doesn't know.

First, the cataloguing. In this area of activity Head participated in and contributed to the beginning and then the development of a new, ambitious and ultimately successful enterprise, that of publishing the British Museum's holdings of Greek coins. But why catalogue? And once one has decided to embark on the task, how does one present the catalogue of one's chosen part of the surviving material evidence of antiquity to the wider scholarly community and public? What to include, what to leave out?

From some points of view, cataloguing and the reasons for it might seem to be a relatively straightforward business. A reviewer of *BMC Central Greece* (1884) stated the objective in general terms: he was pleased to see evidence that national institutions were realizing their "duties to science and to the public"; scholars were being informed about the objects they were studying, and the public was being given access to material in a public collection. Another reviewer, of *BMC Ionia* (1892) spelled out in more detail what such access might entail: "By the assistance of these illustrations, with the descriptions, tables and maps, even students who are unable to visit collections may acquire very valuable information on the subject of Hellenic coinage, and the more favourably situated may with advantage prepare themselves here for that examination of the objects themselves which is indispensable for the true numismatist." A third reviewer (of *BMC Corinth* (1889)) had in mind the needs of a specific group of individuals, namely the collectors of coins: "[t]he volume is well adapted to assist collectors in the identification of coins. The weight, size, device and inscriptions of each piece are given with autotypes of about half of them."

But how does one present one's material most effectively? It depends what one is trying to do of course, and that can introduce complexities. Even at a formal level ideas obviously change and develop over time. The published series of *BM Catalogues of Greek Coins* started with *Italy* in 1873, and finished with *Cyrenaica* in 1927. During that period of more than 50 years, details of the presentation changed in response to a variety of factors: among them, the experience of the editors, the amount of material available to catalogue, the perceived needs of readers and technical developments such as photography.

The fundamental characteristics of the *BM Catalogues* were apparent in the very first one, *Italy* (1873), and were remarked on by a succession of review-

ers: the careful and accurate recording of the coins, with a note in each case of the metal, weight and diameter. From the start there were several Indexes, which did not change fundamentally in content over the years: geographical, types, remarkable symbols, names of magistrates and engravers, remarkable inscriptions and legends. In the course of time a number of additional formal features were included. *Macedonia* (1879) was the first of the volumes to open with a substantial Introduction of 63 pp., treating the subject historically and geographically; it was also the first volume to contain a map, with the names of the different cities underlined in different colours to represent the different weight standards in use. In subsequent volumes maps were not always included (the next of Head's volumes to include one was *Ionia* (1892)), but Introductions became a standard feature, on the whole increasing in length and complexity as time went on. Following *Macedonia* with its 63 pp., *Caria* (1897) had 93 pp. and *Lydia* (1902) had 133 pp. Photographic plates appeared for the first time in *Central Greece* (1884), when there were 24, and the number of plates gradually increased over time: Head's final *BMC*, *Phrygia*, the twenty-fifth volume in the whole series, had 53 plates. Adequate illustration of the material assumed increasing importance.

It might be added here that Head was fortunate to have the means at his disposal to increase the number and enhance the significance of the objects that he was cataloguing. This fact, and its implications, are referred to in the comment of one of the reviewers of the first edition of *Historia Numorum*: "It is indispensable – if the scientific usefulness and accuracy of the catalogues are not to be impaired – that the Keeper of Coins should have funds sufficient to enable him to make his series better worth cataloguing." In at least one instance there is clear evidence of Head's awareness of this aspect of his work. In a review of *Phrygia* (1906), R. Weil described how in 1873 Henri Waddington, the well-known French archaeologist and diplomat with a special interest in the numismatics of Asia Minor, advised Head not to undertake the cataloguing of the Phrygian section until that hitherto so little considered section had been extended in proportion to its importance. Head took that advice seriously and built up the BM's collection of Phrygian coins. In 1873 the Phrygian section in the BM contained about 700 coins, as opposed to the 1686 referred to in Mionnet's *Description des Médailles*. *BMC Phrygia* embraces 2,148 coins.

The writer of one of Head's obituaries summed up his cataloguing activities as follows: "The work of cataloguing thoroughly suited Head. He had unlimited patience, an excellent talent for comparison, a sense of style in art, and a great love of historic research" (*Num. Chron.* 1914: 250). That last quality, the love of historical research and the perspicacity to see how great could be the contribution of numismatics to our understanding of the ancient world, was applied also in another of Head's activities: his series of studies of individual mints. I illustrate the point with a few remarks about his study of one mint, that of Syracuse. His *History of the Coinage of*

Syracuse was published in the *Numismatic Chronicle* for 1874, was quickly turned into a book, and the book equally quickly sold out. The nature of its contribution was immediately recognized, not only in Britain but also abroad: the French Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres awarded it its Prix de Numismatique.

So what did Head do with *Syracuse*? His fundamental contribution was to treat the whole of the coinage of Syracuse from a historical point of view, dividing the coinage of the city into fifteen periods based on a few landmarks of securely dated coins, and assigning to each period the coins of all metals, gold, silver and bronze, whenever internal evidence or analogy allowed it. For the first time the Syracusan series was thus arranged in chronological sequence and treated as a whole from a historical point of view; the coins were now historical documents. And last but by no means least, the woodcuts that had hitherto been employed to illustrate numismatic books were abandoned, and for the first time a numismatic book was illustrated with fourteen plates by the then new autotype method, a version of the collotype process of photomechanical printing, with which it is sometimes equated. In this process, a colloid, for example, gelatine, was spread on a glass plate, the negative juxtaposed to it, and light then applied. The print was made off the gelatine sheet.⁶ This technical innovation, enabling the provision of clear and accurate illustrations of the coins, revolutionised their study.

Head's *Syracuse* received rave reviews when it was first published, and the passage of time has not lessened its significance. Yet one puzzling feature of its methodology is its neglect of hoard evidence for helping to establish the dating of the successive phases of the coinage. Already in the eighteenth century, studies by Gottlieb Siegfried Bayer and by Joseph Pellerin had set high standards of hoard publication, and both men had worked with Greek coins.⁷ Their work was not equalled until well into the nineteenth century, but it was the Roman series, rather than the Greek, that witnessed the greatest advances in the study of hoards, and in particular their application to the problems of dating a coinage. Mommsen's *Geschichte des römischen Münzwesens* (1860) has been characterized as "epoch-making" in its employment of hoard evidence, among other things to arrange the different issues of Roman republican coinage in chronological order.⁸ The book was published a year or two before Head was embarking on his own career as a numismatist, but its lessons appear to have had no immediate impact on the methodologies he applied to the study of Greek coins.

6 I am grateful to Brooks Levy for technical information about the autotype process.

7 P. Kinns, "Two eighteenth-century studies of Greek coin hoards: Bayer and Pellerin", in M. H. Crawford *et al.* (eds.), *Medals and Coins from Bude to Mommsen* (London, 1990), pp. 101–14.

8 M. H. Crawford, *op. cit.* in previous note, p. 131.

Head repeated his success with Syracuse in two further monographs, on the coinages of Ephesus (1880) and Boeotia (1881), and at this point we can return for a moment to the business of cataloguing. I remarked earlier how ideas about the nature of the information to be included in a catalogue can change as a project develops, and I referred to some of the reasons for such changes. This is the moment to introduce another aspect of cataloguing: its relationship to other scholarship and research in the field. In particular, I draw attention to an important feature of Head's own method of work: the way in which a specialist study of a particular field preceded the relevant Catalogue. Head's contribution on Syracuse to *BMC Sicily* (1876) was preceded by his 1874 study of Syracuse; studies of the coinage of Boeotia (1881) and of Ephesus (1880, 1881) preceded *BMC Central Greece* and *BMC Ionia* respectively. (For the method we can compare, later, E. S. G. Robinson's preliminary study, "Quaestiones Cyrenaicae" in *Num. Chron.* 1915 and his *BMC Cyrenaica* volume of 1927.) In other words, specialist studies and cataloguing here go hand in hand. A reviewer of *BMC Caria* commented (1897) on the fact that Head "not only does not confine his introductory remarks to data furnished by the Museum collection, but also adds a supplementary plate representing coins not included in that series." He continues, interestingly, "The volume, therefore, comprises a fairly exhaustive treatment of the whole subject as at present known to numismatists, and transcends considerably the limitations of a special catalogue." We return here to the question raised earlier: What sort of beast is a special catalogue? What or who is it for? What are its limitations and how might they be overcome?

The third and final element in our brief survey of Head's work is his *Historia Numorum* (first ed., 1887; second ed., 1911). Another major work, another major advance in the field, and another source of international recognition: in 1887, the University of Heidelberg gave Head an honorary Doctorate of Philosophy. (He had to wait until 1905, the year before his retirement from the BM, for an honorary Doctorate of Letters from Oxford. He received it at the same ceremony as Basil Gildersleeve, Professor of Greek at Johns Hopkins).

The aim of *Historia Numorum*, in Head's own words, was "to produce a practical handbook in a single portable volume containing in a condensed form a sketch of the numismatic history of nearly every city, king, or dynast, known to have struck coins throughout the length and breadth of the ancient world".⁹ From the time of its first publication this work was recognised as a monument of scholarship, a κτῆμα ἐς αἰεῖ, as one reviewer wrote. Its prominent feature was the arrangement of the various series of coins in chronological order, and it compressed an enormous amount of information into one volume. Reviewers at the time remarked on the personal qualities that had enabled Head to undertake such a work and carry it through to completion:

9 HN², p. xix.

one referred to “a really inspiring instance of literary patience and courage”. Apart from such references to qualities of a personal nature, there is also present in the reviews an element which appears quite frequently in assessments of scholarly activity at the time: a rivalry with institutions on the continent. One reviewer begins thus: “The one department of learning in which English scholars are unquestionably in advance of their German rivals is the study of numismatics.” Another comments that “this book deserves as few do the German epithet of epoch-making in respect of the science with which it is concerned”. Rivalry or cooperation? How did the practitioners as opposed to the commentators see things? There is more work to be done on this aspect of Head’s international work and reputation.

I referred above to Head’s concern to arrange the various series of coins in chronological order, but his methodology in *Historia Numorum*, in particular his reliance on style, has not advanced from that employed in his earlier work discussed above. The basic structure of Head’s “chronological classification of coins by style” is one of rise, acme and decline.¹⁰ The origins of such a structure derive both from general intellectual movements of the time and from developments specific to the study of ancient art and coinage. It has been suggested, for example, that “the whole structure owes much to contemporary patterns of thought, which were strongly influenced by the theories of Darwin, with their emphasis on evolution and the biological cycle”.¹¹ But nearer to home, in terms of the study of Greek and Roman art, the *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1764) of Johann Joachim Winckelmann had much earlier set out a division of ancient art into four periods, the first defined as archaic, the middle two covering the fifth and the fourth centuries, and the final one covering the decline of the arts under Roman rule. In numismatics, Joseph Eckhel’s *Doctrina numorum veterum*, published in Vienna during the 1790s, adopted a geographical arrangement for Greek coins, beginning in the western Mediterranean and working east, but within that scheme it created five periods (*epochae*) based on a number of criteria (for example, metal, inscription, letter forms, fabric and style). Thus Eckhel tried to bring out the historical significance of the coins he was working with.

Head and his colleagues adopted and adapted the schemes of their predecessors as they worked on their own catalogues. Andrew Burnett has traced how the classification evolved from its appearances in the earliest volumes of the British Museum *Catalogues* to its fullest articulation in *Historia Numorum*.¹²

10 HN², pp. lxi–lxiv.

11 O. Mørkholm, *Nordisk Numismatisk Arsskrift*, 1982, p. 10.

12 In a paper, “The study of coins in Britain and the British Museum during the nineteenth century”, given in May 2003 to a conference held at the University of Frankfurt-am-Main on the theme “Theodor Mommsen 1817–1903. Numismatik oder Geldgeschichte?”.

- I Period of Archaic Art (700–480 B.C.)
- II Period of Transitional Art (480–415 B.C.)
- III Period of Finest Art (415–336 B.C.)
- IV Period of Later Fine Art (336–280 B.C.)
- V Period of the Decline of Art (280–146 B.C.)
- VI Period of Continued Decline in Art (146–27 B.C.)
- VII Imperial Period. Augustus to Gallienus (27 B.C.–A.D. 268)

In this structure the division into periods relies on dates in political history, though Head has preferred to separate his periods II and III in 415 rather than 404. That is probably because the fine decadrachms of Kimon and Euainetos were at that time dated to 413/412, and he wanted them to be included in his “Period of Finest Art”. A further oddity, noted by Andrew Burnett in the paper referred to above, is Head’s very designation of that Period III (the fourth century) as the “Period of Finest Art”. This in spite of his working daily cheek by jowl with the Parthenon marbles.

It is said of Barclay Head that he was “one of the rare and happy men who seem to have been born to do a particular piece of work in the world, and to do it admirably” (*Num. Chron.* 1914, 249). I conclude with what I believe to be a complete bibliography of this unassuming scholar who contributed so much to the development of Greek numismatics as an integral part of the study of the ancient world.

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(NC = Numismatic Chronicle; BMC = British Museum Catalogue)

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