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THEODORE V. BUTTREY (1929–2018)



Theodore V. Buttrey (ANS Newsletter Winter 1996, 5)

The death of Theodore V. Buttrey January 9 at the age of 88 left a gaping hole in numismatics. He has now had many obituaries that rehearse the details of his biography, a testimony to his prominence. Briefly, he attended Princeton, taking his Ph.D. in May, 1953 with a dissertation entitled “Studies in the coinage of Marc Antony” where he was taught by, among others, Louis C. West, then President of the American Numismatic Society. West was retired but still a presence at Princeton, and Ted was quick to acknowledge his debt to him. Part of that debt may have consisted of Ted’s admission to the first ever Seminar in Numismatics at the American Numismatic Society (1952). The Society itself was very much a Princeton organization in that day, and no less than five of the first admittees were Princeton men. After a Fulbright Fellowship in Italy he was employed at Yale, both as Assistant Professor and Assistant Curator, until the purge of 1964 sent him to the University of Michigan.

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His early numismatic work centered on the late Republic and, as had his dissertation, the triumviral coinage portrait coinage.^[1] Subsequent papers detailed other coinages of the period;^[2] but his most significant contribution was centered on the Princeton excavations at Morgantina, with their consequences for the date of the first denarius.^[3] The coincidence of literary, archaeological, and numismatic evidence ought to have closed the matter, and the new chronology was enshrined in Michael Crawford's *Roman Republican Coinage* (1974), but Ted would return to it as late as 1979 to refine his treatment.^[4]

Morgantina was the first of many involvements with archaeological sites. There followed Carthage,^[5] Apollonia,^[6] Sardis,^[7] and Cosa.^[8] His students, Metcalf and Visonà, would continue his work at Carthage, the latter devoting himself to the larger Punic coinage in copper and billon.

A hiatus in his work was no doubt brought on, in part, by his role as a single parent of four children, in addition to his energetic teaching and increased responsibilities as Chair of the Department of Classical Studies and Director of the Keley Museum of Archaeology at Michigan.

The 1970s began what was doubtless his happiest and most productive period. He then met Ann Johnston, who would become his wife. Ann could not quite be called his student, since she had already published, in 1967, her classic on the earliest preserved Greek map,^[9] but at her arrival in Ann Arbor as recipient of a Power Foundation Exchange Fellowship she chose to study Greek. Ted had recently split from his wife, and the

[1] *The triumviral portrait gold of the quattuorviri monetales of 42 B.C.* (ANSNMM 37, New York, 1956).

[2] ΘΕΑ ΝΕΩΤΕΡΑ on coins of Antony and Cleopatra, *ANSMN* 6 (1954), p. 95-109; The 'Pietas' denarii of Sextus Pompey, *NC* 6th series 20 (1960), p. 83-101; The denarii of Cn. Pompeius Jr. and M. Minatius Sabinus, *ANSMN* 9 (1960), p. 75-94; The denarii of P. Ventidius, *ANSMN* 9(1960), p. 95-108.

[3] The Morgantina excavations and the date of the Roman denarius, *Congreso Internazionale di Numismatica Roma, 1961, II. Atti*, p. 261-267. Reprinted with revisions in *Morgantina Studies* 2, Princeton 1989, p. 215-219.

[4] Morgantina and the denarius, *NAC* 8 (1979), p. 149-157. Reprinted with revisions in *Morgantina Studies* 2, Princeton 1989, p. 220-226.

[5] The Coins, in J.H. Humphrey, ed., *Kelsey Museum of Archaeology. Excavations at Carthage 1975 1*, p. 157-197; The coins-1976, in J.H. Humphrey, ed., *Kelsey Museum of Archaeology. Excavations at Carthage conducted by the University of Michigan 4*, p. 99-163.

[6] The Coins, in J.H. Humphrey, ed., *Apollonia, the port of Cyrene, excavations by the University of Michigan, 1965-1967*, p. 335-370 (Tripoli, 1976).

[7] *Greek, Roman, and Islamic Coins from Sardis* (Archaeological Exploration of Sardis 7, Cambridge, MA, 1981) (with Ann Johnston, Michael L. Bates & Kenneth M. Mackenzie).

[8] Cosa: the Coins, *MAAR* 34 (1980), p. 1-153.

[9] A.E.M. Johnston, The earliest preserved Greek map: a new Ionian coin type, *JHS* 87 (1967), p. 86-94.

attraction between him and Ann was mutual. She nominally studied Greek with him, but also absorbed numismatics to the extent that she made her own significant contributions to the discipline, including some in collaboration with him. Their eventual separation was amicable to the point that he would act as her executor at her untimely death.

But it was “Triumviri” which told us most of what would come. There Buttrey examined minutely the dies used to strike the coinage, bringing together a college of moneymakers that had theretofore defied classification. The task involved the minute comparison of several dozen dies in order to establish the relative order of their use. This would seem an act of the most extreme anal compulsion, and so it would be, if the representations were identical; but they were not, and, as he observed, the reward was great: “... if anything is accomplished in this manner, the results will stand permanently, against theory and conjecture.” This kind of meticulous attention to detail was eventually to be applied in his most notorious engagement, with false Mexican gold bars. There he noted the use of the same broken die for different issues to discredit a whole class of highly commercial gold bars, starting a controversy that would eventually extend to the American West and thus affect a vastly larger community of collectors and historians. The entire engagement with this class of false history cost him time and money, when he was forced to defend a libel action and could not publish his results in the United States. But so versatile was the man, and so firm his dedication to history: it offended him that historical evidence should be fabricated as it was in the case of the gold bars.

After forty years of engagement with coins both ancient and modern, he was rewarded with the medal of the Royal Numismatic Society and the Archer M. Huntington Medal of the American Numismatic Society, two of the highest distinctions the discipline bestows. This did not deter him from the essentially clerical task of building up the collection of auction and sale catalogues at the Fitzwilliam Museum. Before the days of baggage charges, he used to cross the Atlantic with huge suitcases, bringing the Fitz’s and other materials to the American Numismatic Society’s library in exchange for the latter’s duplicates. The Fitzwilliam now has the best repository of sale literature anywhere, due almost exclusively to Ted’s efforts.

Ted talked of many projects in hand, all left unfinished at his death. The biggest of these, which occupied him for the longest time, was the coinage of P. Crepusius. His study of this coinage to demonstrate the use of two anvils in the Roman Republican mint is definitive; it also provides the best documentation for the number of dies used to strike a coinage, and for their representation in the surviving population.^[10] After the death of

^[10] The denarii of P. Crepusius and Roman Republican mint organization, *ANSMN* 21 (1976), p. 67-108.

Charles Hersh, who had first treated the coinage in 1952, and Ted's own article, he undertook the documentation of every known specimen, with most of the legwork done by Giles F. Carter until his own death in 2010.

This obituary has focused, more than others, on the purely numismatic side of his career, and has left to one side Ted's enthusiasm for everything he did, from numismatics to literature (mainly Greek) to learning about his adopted country and showing it to others, not to mention his excursions into television and publishing. But above all he was a teacher. I recall four courses with him; in addition to numismatics there were Theocritus, Euripides, and his famous survey of Greek tragedy. His course in Great Books, taught in Ann Arbor in the 1980s, raised the roof. His delight in students, and the mere act of teaching, was best captured for me by William R. Day, his colleague at the Fitzwilliam, in an email written during Ted's last days:

"I feel that I have seen a true master at work, which is something to behold. Sans notes, sans anything but a few coins and a few slides - yes, he was still working with slides rather than powerpoint - he went about his lectures, inviting any and all interruptions but never losing his place or skipping a beat, and the students were enthralled. He was able, without readily apparent effort, to make ancient coins relevant to students of the digital age. His love of the students came through even in his illness. When he learned of a young medical student who was doing a project on patients with terminal illnesses, he invited the student into his home to talk at length on all and sundry on several occasions."

For me, and for many others, there will not be another like him.