

Special exhibit

Antique counterfeits

Coins have been tampered with and counterfeited to the advantage of individuals or for the supposed good of the state ever since they were first “invented” as an economic medium of exchange in the 7th century BC. As long as the metal was the main factor determining a coin’s purchasing power, changes to its purity and weight could bring considerable profits. Costs could be reduced sharply by producing “precious metal coins” which had a core of non-precious metal and a wafer-thin coating of gold or silver. If the coating cracked or rubbed off, the coin's true nature came to light.



Antique coins and British ring money with a copper core and precious metal coating [enlarged]

It is generally difficult or, in many cases, simply impossible to tell who was responsible for the production of a surrogate payment medium – official bodies or individuals. Sometimes it is not even a question of whether an object is “genuine” or “counterfeit” when a piece is demonstrably not from official production. For example, if there was a shortage of cash, Rome allowed imitations of its official currency to be minted locally in remote regions of its empire, such as the Middle Danube, the Rhineland and Gaul, as well as Britain and Egypt. Such “counterfeits”, like the official coins, were either struck or cast. Cutting a die requires fine workmanship and artistry. If these skills were lacking, the finished product was not entirely convincing.



Roman models (left) and minted Gallic imitations [enlarged]

Cast imitations, however, nearly equal the quality of the originals since the latter were squeezed into the material of a mould that served as a model. The only thing that could go wrong was that the moulds might be mixed up so that the obverse and reverse sides of a cast coin did not match.



Moulds made of clay [original size]

One tool for producing consistently high-quality stamping dies is a punch or die – a positive metal copy of a coin to be imitated. This is struck into a bronze or iron plate to produce a complete new (negative) die in a single operation. Such punches may be made entirely of bronze or of bronze-coated copper.



Punch for producing an obverse stamp
(Top, bottom and side views; enlarged)

As much information as possible on the historical background and origins has to be collected in order to pass judgement on any coin that does not originate with absolute certainty from official production – not everything that is “unofficial” is necessarily a counterfeit produced for fraudulent purposes.