

Introduction

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The McGill University Collection of Greek and Roman Coins: Vol. I. Roman coins. By D.H.E.Whitehead. Vol. II. Greek Gold and Silver Coins. By F.E. Shlosser. Vol. III. Ancient Bronze Coins. By F.E. Shlosser. . Bound in 1 volume

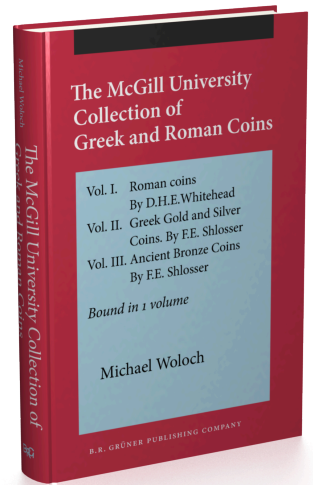
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INTRODUCTION

The History of the McGill University
Coin Collection

McGill's Numismatic Collection, odd as it may sound in our age of super-documentation, has no background which can accurately be delineated. The blame for this puzzle must be attached to whoever was responsible for accessioning material which came into McGill's museums at the time when the University either received or purchased the coins. But not even this date can be surmised. In 1966 the coins turned up in the old McCord Museum, which was being emptied to make room for a new library complex. The people responsible for the transfer of the various materials housed in the McCord rather matter-of-factly contacted the then Chairman of the McGill Classics Department, Professor Colin D. Gordon, to whom the coins were turned over. Where they originated, no one knew; people connected with the University's museums over the course of the previous twenty or thirty years could provide no clues.

What do the coins themselves tell us? Professor Gordon described to me their condition on reception: they were contained in a large green, metal box, within which the coins were strewn haphazardly in and out of candy boxes, a tobacco can, and a small wooden cabinet of the type once popular for the storage of coin collections but which was warped and rotten with age. This disorganized condition can probably be attributed to the beating which they received in the various movings likely witnessed over the years. Amongst the contents of the box there was a scrap of paper with a description of a coin issued to commemorate the "meeting" of Seneca and St. Paul (there was no coin); otherwise, there was no catalogue. Moreover, the Greek and Roman coins were not alone in the box; several Ceylonese coins, an Italian sequin, and some British Empire materials were also among the mélange; these pieces have since been dispersed through the McGill community and elsewhere. The classical coins displayed a few traces of having once been organized. number of the coins were accompanied by small paper discs on which was

written certain information, though evidencing no particular plan. The discs sometimes bore a description of the individual coin, sometimes the legend, occasionally a Poole number (presumably a reference to the early catalogue of British Museum coinage); on a few a sum of money is written, in pounds sterling, possibly the price paid for the coin. Several of the coins have stuck to their surface small adhesive stickers bearing a number (one, two, or three digits); but both the discs and the stickers are too few in number to indicate any pattern. In point of fact it appears that only one thing can be ascertained from the coins themselves: leaving aside the non-classical materials, the contents of the collection point to a single collector rather than a number of unrelated sources (or possibly two since, as Professor Gordon observed, the writing on the surviving discs was from two different hands). Save for rare instances -- the large number of Tarentine pieces amongst the Greek and of *antoniniani* of Probus amongst the Roman -- the collection is fairly evenly distributed over a reasonable chronological and geographical scale. The Tarentine and Proban coins may only point to a chance purchase of a hoard or a particular interest; the latter possibility seems the more likely since the quantity of exact duplicates amongst them is minimal.

What then has research told us? With the coins came a rumour, of uncertain origin, that the coins were the gift of one of Montreal's most distinguished founding families, the Molsons, today of brewing renown but at the turn of the century leading bankers in the city (and do not banking and coinage have a slight affinity?). Mrs. F.E. Shlosser, while working on her Master's thesis, looked into the validity of this rumour. The results are interesting but one remains short of certainty. The two items which Mrs. Shlosser turned up, with the help of the Molson family archives, are as follows: that in the will of John H.R. Molson (probated June 3, 1897) the University's representatives were permitted to take from his office any "books, coins, and other articles of value . . . that it may require," (1) and a later statement in a McGill Report of c. 1932 listing McGill's Numismatic Collection as including, amongst other things, a gift of classical and Canadian coins from J.H.R. Molson. Two questions arise: why is this the only known mention of a McGill Numismatic Collection and, secondly, what became of the Canadian coins if the collection with which

we are dealing originated in the Molson will. The most that can be said is that a part of the collection may represent the Molson bequest.

The major problem which we faced in our search was the lack of records, and the lack of specification in what records do exist. One of the few sets of records which were a potential source of clues were those in the ethnographic section of the Redpath Museum at McGill University, which span the period from approximately 1900 to the 1940's. There are several mentions of bequests of coins, but details are sparse. For example, it was considered enough to cite "Roman coins. Carthage." and the donor's name; but what does such a "mysterious plural" signify? Once again, we must conclude that at most these coins form a fraction of the collection and even on this point we must remain dubious since a large section -- precisely which are unknown -- of the ethnographic materials remain in storage awaiting cataloguing and a permanent home.

A similar problem arises in the matter of a further clue. In the course of her own work Mrs. D. Alison (whose help over the last few months of this project has earned my gratitude), a technician in the Redpath Museum, showed me a section of one of the few existing minute books of that institution containing a copy of a letter (dated January 18, 1922) from the wife of Rupert E. Kingsford, after whose father a chair of history had once been named, in which she advises the University of her late husband's gift of a collection of coins "on condition it was kept together and not mixed with other coins, and to be called 'the Kingsford Collection'." Its contents were listed as follows:

Parcel 1.	Medals, old English and American	304
2.	Medals and coins	167
3.	Copper coins, Australian, etc.	286
4.	War tokens, etc.	508
5.	Medals	66
6.	Consular Roman coins	66

1397 (2)

The "Consular Roman coins", presumably Republican, may be part of the collection with which we are dealing -- the number is not an incongruous

figure -- but if this is the case, where are the remaining non-classical items? Even if the terms "copper coins" and "medals" are loose descriptions for Greek and Roman coins, too many pieces remain unaccounted for.

A further clue which we were able to uncover, again an inconclusive one, was found in the Rare Book Room of McGill's Blacker-Wood Library. In the late 1920's a Montreal organization, the Natural History Society, closed its doors and in the process turned over most of its materials and records, as well as debts, to McGill University. In the handwritten catalogue detailing the dispersal of the Society's holdings there is mention of one box of coins (3) being forwarded to the Redpath Museum. Once more we bog down in imprecision. Presuming that this box contained the Society's numismatic collection, I perused the journals and records of the Society in an effort to pinpoint the components of said collection. No catalogue of the collection could be found, but enough was discovered to indicate an extensive collection of coins, some classical, but many more of Canadian, American, and modern European variety. An early report states:

In addition, however, the Council will, for the first time mention that the society possesses a considerable number of Coins, ancient and modern, the majority of certainly no great value, but always useful in an extensive collection, while few are valuable as antiquities or as historical records It will at present suffice to say that of Coins and Medals there are two of gold, 105 of Silver, 185 of Copper and 50 of Bronze, forming a total of 297. (4)

The numbers can conform to our purposes, especially considering the early date of this extract and the evident aggrandizement in the subsequent period, but once again any certainty is hampered by cursory descriptions.

As a last step, the University Archives were approached, whose staff, though extremely busy, made available all possible help. Numerous records were gone through, part by myself and part by the research archivist Mr. Grant Armstrong and his associates, but to little avail. Only two relevant pieces of information were turned up. The first was the

mention in the Annual Report for 1863 of a donation of "18 specimens of Roman coins" by a Mr. E.T. Hemmings. The second piece of information is of a more titillating character. Among the papers of former McGill principal and classical scholar, Sir William Peterson (5) there is a discussion of an offer by a Mrs. Clark Murray to sell to the University a coin collection consisting of Greek, Roman, Asiatic and Russian coins to an approximate total of two thousand coins; from whom Mrs. Murray received the coins is unknown. The series of letters from Principal Peterson seems to indicate two facts: firstly, that the contents of Mrs. Murray's collection are at least partially consistent with those of our collection and, secondly, that Mrs. Murray's claim on the collection was of tenuous validity (in fact the prevailing tone of the letters is not at all one consonant with an amiable business transaction). But we lack the complementary letters from Peterson's correspondents in the matter; the letters tell us only that the coins remained at least for a short while in the unofficial safekeeping of the University and that possibly Mrs. Murray eventually dropped her already shaky claim to the collection in favour of the University. The ultimate source and the ultimate destiny of Mrs. Murray's collection, like the entire question before us, remains a matter for conjecture. Other than these interesting, if not quite satisfying tidbits, the Archives produced nothing. But this does not mean that all possibilities have been exhausted. The time available has been limited, and many of the papers stored in the Archives are as yet unedited and therefore would require an effort far out of proportion with the potential results. It is to be hoped that future work on them may disclose an answer to our question.

To conclude, let us sum up what can fairly accurately be posited of McGill's Numismatic Collection. The largest part probably represents the private collection of a single individual of substantial income who maintained a fairly serious interest in classical numismatics and who sold, donated or bequeathed it to the University around the turn of the century or earlier; perhaps a small fraction represents subsequent additions from other sources. The reason for its obscured history can probably be attributed to a lack of interest on the part of those whose duty it was to care for them; over the

years McGill's museums have largely handled Canadiana and natural history, and in such collections ancient coins have found no home. The collection is too large to have passed into the University's possession without some form of official recognition, and therefore it seems only reasonable to expect that at some future date, probably amongst the University's very early and presently most cumbersome records, a solution might be discovered.

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 April 1975

Footnotes

- (1) quoted in an introduction to F.E. Shlosser, *Ancient Greek Gold and Silver Coins in the McGill University Collection*. (diss. McGill University, Montreal, 1970).
- (2) This document is to be found in the McGill University Archives, and is presently in the preparatory stages of publication by the Archives. The mention of the Kingsford collection is on pages 5-6.
- (3) to be found in *Natural History Museum Inventory March 7, 1906* which is followed by *Distribution of Material from the Natural History Society of Montreal*; the coins are mentioned on the 16th page of this second section.
- (4) *Third Annual Report of the Natural History Society of Montreal*. (Montreal, 1830), pages 7-8.
- (5) the letters of March 29, 1902 to January 26, 1904 are found in *Peterson Letters Books*, pages 42 f.f.