

## The ACE Project – A Teacher’s Journal

I first learned about the ACE project when Souza Steverding solicited my University of Kentucky Classics professor husband Ross Scaife for the name of a Latin teacher who would be interested in cleaning Roman coins as a classroom project. Although at the time I felt both overwhelmed by the busy term and anxious that I didn’t know ANYTHING about Roman coins, I recognized that the activity would provide my students with an unusually immediate connection to the Romans, something quite challenging to create in Latin classes. I also knew I would never be able to live with my conscience if I let the opportunity pass by. As soon as I “signed up,” my own anticipation began to grow, so that on the morning that I saw the fat envelope waiting in my teacher mailbox, my heart started to pound, and when I first held the mound of coins in my hand, my imagination began to whirl about what Romans had held these coins and how they had been spent, or hidden, or perhaps even dropped along the path. I was surprised by how engaging they were, but realized that they would transport my students to the ancient world too if I could do a good job to create a context for these tiny pieces of bronze with their mysterious images.

(I realize that this description may seem melodramatic to veteran coin collectors, but to those who have studied the language of the Romans for many years, yet experienced their artifacts only under glass, or in pictures, or on too rare trips abroad, the idea of holding a Roman citizen’s pocket change is powerful. I must add that in talking with other ACE teachers, I have heard similar accounts of “THE COINS arrived today!” or “We ran to get the camera to photograph the opening of THE COINS!”)

The project proceeded as a giant learning odyssey for everyone. I soon realized that the students’ most obvious and elementary questions, such as “What denomination are the coins?”, or “How much were they worth?” were the hardest to answer, and I was thrilled when I could not only discern on a student’s coin a bust, but also feel confident that I was holding it right side up. I was grateful for the ACE resources that suggested lesson plans, furnished useful handouts, and provided links to wonderful teaching websites. The introduction to VanMeter’s *Handbook of Ancient Roman Coins*, which ACE also provided, became my bible. Finding that getting a “quick” handle on any range of coinage was unrealistic, I focused at first on learning about the processes of minting coins, a topic which held great fascination, especially since so few minting artifacts and literary records remain despite the huge quantities of coins. I required my students to use the ACE on-line discussion group, probably the best teacher mandate I gave for the whole project, for as students wrote in their questions, the ACE numismatists responded in amazing speed with replies that were not only enthusiastic, but also related tidbits that captivated us, such as anecdotes about wacky emperors, descriptions of how victories evolved into angels (of great interest to students at a Catholic school!), and how 4<sup>th</sup> century “counterfeits” may have addressed coin shortages and actually been sanctioned by local Roman officials. The hands-on project motivated all of my students, even those who had long ago tuned out Latin grammar.

The project's potential as a way to include periods of later Roman history into our Latin curriculum made a big impression, and at a spring meeting of the Kentucky Technology Conference, I was able to present the unit to the 2002 Kentucky Foreign Language Academy, a group of foreign language teachers who were developing ways to strengthen students' social studies and humanities skills through lessons done in foreign language classes.

The summer provided a unique opportunity to share the coin experience with other students. The Kentucky Junior Classical League was hosting at the University of Kentucky the annual convention of the National Junior Classical League, an organization of Latin students that brings together 1600 participants with tunics and togas in their suitcases for a week of creative and academic competition, workshops, Roman banquets, and a show of great spirit. ACE President Mark Lehman came laden with enough coins to lead two coin-cleaning workshops for over 100 students, as well as a seminar and a research session in the UK computer lab. The hands-on activity was described as one of the most popular highlights of the convention.

My second season of ACE offered many more opportunities to learn, especially now that I had cultivated a comfortable-enough relationship with Mark Lehman and other ACE members to ask them many coin questions. And ask I surely did, always receiving in return thorough and patient help, no matter how elementary the topic. And, with a teacher who was on somewhat familiar turf, my students got more advanced coin lessons. I was sometimes able to give advice to other new ACE teachers as well and to contribute class activities to ACE's "Teacher Supplied Resources" files. The images I had collected on minting and casting became a presentation that I used in my classroom, then later the subject of two seminars I gave for students at the Kentucky Junior Classical League Convention.

My students' mystery coins and questions were always the impetus to study further, and little did they know that I spent a lot more time on coin homework than they! One of the my students, "Rufus" in Latin, was fortunate enough to have received a Greek provincial coin (a Caracalla with a four-coiled snake on the reverse). Because the images were very indistinct, the identity of this coin with its Greek inscription created much suspense in our class, and it took time and help from ACE for us to solve the mystery. The attribution then shed light on the relationship between provincial magistrates and their charges, because at the time we happened to be reading the letters of Pliny the Younger, a provincial governor in Bithynia, a region not all that far from where this coin had been minted. A laptop and new digital projector in my classroom, furnished through a technology initiative at Lexington Catholic High School, allowed us to look at coin websites together in class and once even snicker over Mark Lehman's coin joke we saw on the Moneta discussion group. When we tackled the essay topics ACE set for the contests, we delved into dimensions of the Roman world that were new to all of us. In addition to understanding more about lesser known emperors such as Gordian III, Gallienus, and Probus, and the turmoil of the late Roman Empire, we learned about the depictions of the Colosseum on coins (the only known contemporary images of this amphitheater), how much an extravagant inheritance might be, and why a member of a

Praetorian Guard might murder his commander in order to secure a raise. The students responded well to the creative essay topics, and by the end of the year, we had had a student place in all three of the contests. The more I learned, the more coin connections I found with other facets of our late Republic/early Empire Latin curriculum, so even while reading Cicero, Pliny, and Vergil, we still had short “coin moments,” and the awarding of the essay prize coins always provided these opportunities as well.

I must add that I saw the students’ general appreciation of ancient artifacts grow as the year went on. We had talked about the responsible use of artifacts, about advanced regulations in England that better protected coins, and about the dilemma Europeans face when finding archaeological remains on their property. When we attended a lecture at UK on the Delphic Oracle, we learned that the temple to Apollo had been destroyed by Christians who had considered it an almost unsurmountable threat, and this related to the Bamyian Buddhas in Afghanistan. When the Baghdad Museum was looted it was my students this time who brought up the topic in class, very disturbed by this news. I could hardly imagine that this event would have made such a great impression on 16-year-olds without the experience of the coin project.

The year ended with exciting culminating events. First I learned that I had received a scholarship and travel funds to attend a summer workshop offered by the American Numismatics Association entitled “Coins in the Classroom.” We received from coin collector Steve Ford a generous supply of coin auction catalogs which students browsed, fascinated to see a broad array of ancient coins, since our unit had concentrated on 4<sup>th</sup> century bronzes, and also finally satisfying their curiosity about precious metal coins and how much they cost on the modern market. With the help of Souzana Steverding contacting Moneta coin group members, we also received two very nice Roman provincial snake coins, one each from David MacDonald and Daniel Hoffman, along with a copy of the Celator article about the same to show students just how lucky “Rufus” had been. Finally, as though these experiences had not been treats enough, Tom Schroer, a Cincinnati numismatist, visited our school with a selection of his magnificent coins. In a too short session he gave a survey of Roman coinage, making meaningful many details I had read, but carrying all of us much further in our experience. He brought majestic sestertii, pieces that documented steps towards the Christian Roman Empire, as well as oil lamps, a manuscript of the Gospel of John, Roman weights, and a piece of Roman glass. He let the students handle all of his artifacts, and they were captivated. Holding those coins once again I had another overwhelming feeling of being in the presence of the Romans.

Mr. Schroer also delivered a prize for me, far grander than I could ever have imagined. I had won a gold solidus of Justinian I as the recipient of the 2002-2003 Harlan J. Berk Teacher Excellence Award, an award created by ACE with the generous donation of Mr. Berk, a world-renowned Chicago numismatist. For a teacher who was already so gratified by this new dimension of study, I was just shocked by the generosity of this prize, and it was wonderful to experience the excitement among my students when I passed around the coin. I find it extremely difficult to convey my appreciation to the organization of ACE, to Harlan J. Berk, and to many individual members of the coin

community who have contributed to this wonderful program. It is a powerfully effective teaching project, one that contributes directly to the immediate lessons of the Latin or history classroom, but also one that will continue to open doors to our students towards a richer understanding of the present because of an appreciation of the past. They will be more open-minded travelers, more informed museum visitors, and better participants in this modern day world.

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