

# DISSERTATIONES ARCHAEOLOGICAE

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Budapest 2018

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# A republican plated denarius from Aquincum

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## Abstract

A puzzling plated republican denarius was found decades ago in the civil town of Aquincum. Due to its worn state its identification was troublesome, but it turned out to be an imitation of M. Furius' coin minted in 119 BC. It is unique for Aquincum, and also quite rare in Pannonia, which raises a number of questions. Even more perplexing are the two mountings on the obverse, which served to fasten the coin to some other object. It is unfortunately impossible to tell, when and why this 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC plated denarius appeared in the 2–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD civil town.

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Republican denarii are very rare in Aquincum, the reasons for which are evident, since the Roman town was only established in the last quarter of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.<sup>1</sup> All the more peculiar it is to find a denarius from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC while examining the coin finds of the civil town. Naturally, such a piece catches the attention immediately. The coin itself is that of M. Furius minted in 119 BC in Rome (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Plated denarius of M. Furius from Aquincum (Photo: Péter Komjáthy, Aquincum Museum).

M. Furius L. f. 119 BC.

Obv: [M FOVRI L F]

Laureate head of Janus

Rev: ROMA // PHILI (partially in ligature)

Roma standing left, holding scepter and crowning trophy of Gallic arms flanked by shield and carnix on each side

Den: denarius subaeratus

Weight: 2.51 g

Die axis: 10 h

Mint: Rome

Ref: RRC 281/1

Inv. Nr. 51325



Fig. 2. Original denarius of M. Furius (Classical Numismatic Group - <http://www.cngcoins.com>).

Or at least the original was (Fig. 2), since this piece is only a very inadequately struck plated imitation. The silver coating is now missing from the copper core, which is not surprising since the surface is considerably worn on both sides. The depictions are in a very low

1 LÁNG 2015, 538.

relief, and the whole coin in general is quite flat. The imitation is not a very skilled one, but it is competent enough to identify the original coin. Since the details still visible today are accurate, both the ligature and the depiction, it can be concluded that the forger must have seen an original one or at least a much better copy of it. Its size of 2×1.8 mm matches that of a genuine republican denarius.

There are two mountings on the obverse, opposite each other at 2 h and 8 h, paying attention not to damage the head of Janus. Thus the coin was fastened to some kind of a metal object, or was perhaps used as a ring. However it may have been employed, the reverse with Roma crowning a trophy was obviously more important or visually more pleasing than the obverse. However, this mounting does not align with the depiction on either side, it is at a slant angle. The heavy wear on both sides of the coin indicate that these had occurred before the coin was fastened to that particular object, otherwise only the reverse would be worn. Another important question is what it was used for, since its weight is more than 1 g lighter than the original denarius, along with its cheap material, meant that it was very easily spotted as not genuine. A function as a tessera or a test strike is unlikely.

Only very little is known about the find circumstance. The piece was discovered by the eastern civilian city walls in 1943, but nothing more can be traced back. This unfortunately leaves us with the lack of context, thus it is impossible to tell when the republican plated coin was used and lost.

Republican denarii are not common in Pannonia, especially the ones from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. Plated ones are even fewer with only six known pieces from the territory of modern-day Hungary.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately no published photo of them is available to compare them to the coin from Aquincum. Republican coins are very rare in Aquincum as well, with only six other examples identified, three being a legionary denarii of Marc Anthony, which are not rare in later contexts either. The other four were minted by M. Plaetorius M. f. Cestianus, Caesar, M. Mettius and P. Plautius Hypsaesus, thus none of them are older than the second third of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.<sup>3</sup>

Because of the geographical location it seems evident to search for parallels among the Eraviscan copies of the Roman republican denarii. After all this tribe inhabited the territory of what was to become Aquincum. Yet we encounter the problem of very different style, material and weight.<sup>4</sup>

When talking about republican denarii imitations the Geto-Dacian coins also come to mind, which also spread to Pannonia.<sup>5</sup> These forgeries even have the type in question (RRC 281/1). However, these coins are of different character, since they were mostly made of high-quality silver flans, even though plated examples are known as well.<sup>6</sup> The latter ones have erratic weights between 2.1–3.5 g thus corresponding to the coin from Aquincum.<sup>7</sup> Their dating is even more interesting, since these republican coins were produced in Dacia until the Roman conquest, and even appear in 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD context.<sup>8</sup>

2 FMRU II 148/78, 87; 326/180 (Arrabona); 328/265 (Pannonhalma Archabbey); FMRU III 218/6 (Brigetio); RAFMMU III 126/2 (Savaria).

3 RRC 405/3, 420/1a, 468/1, 480/17.

4 For the Eraviscan coinage see TORBÁGYI 1984; TORBÁGYI 2003.

5 WOYTEK et al. 2012, 135–137, 143–144.

6 For the most recent discussion on this topic see also DAVIS 2006; LOCKYEAR 2007; STAN 2014.

7 We even find lower weight for far less worn coins. Gemini Auctions 9 (8 January 2012), lots 764–767.

8 WOYTEK et al. 2012, 137–138, 143, 155; GĂZDAC – GUDEA 2006, 27.



In lack of a more plausible explanation we are left with the question of a possible Dacian origin of the republican plated denarius from Aquincum. This would then account for the imitation of a republican coin and a late 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD date. Unfortunately, it is now impossible to tell how and when this coin found its way to the civil town of Aquincum. It may have had a sentimental value because of its archaic and peculiar appearance, prior to the complete abrasion of the silver plating, and was thus brought here as a souvenir. This could have also been the reason for fastening it to some other material. Or is it the other way around: was it used for decorative purposes because it had lost its monetary character? However it may be, we may never know for sure.

The peculiar republican coin imitation of M. Furius originally found before the walls of the civil town of Aquincum leaves us with more questions than answers. The plated versions of the republican denarii are quite rare in the Hungarian part of Pannonia. This is especially true of a 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC coin in a 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD context. Several factors indicate that it could be of Geto-Dacian origin, but a non-Dacian or a local imitation cannot be ruled out either. For the lack of find context we may never find an answer to how, when, and why this peculiar coin made its appearance in Aquincum, however, further similar denarii subaerati will hopefully shed more light on this interesting topic.

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