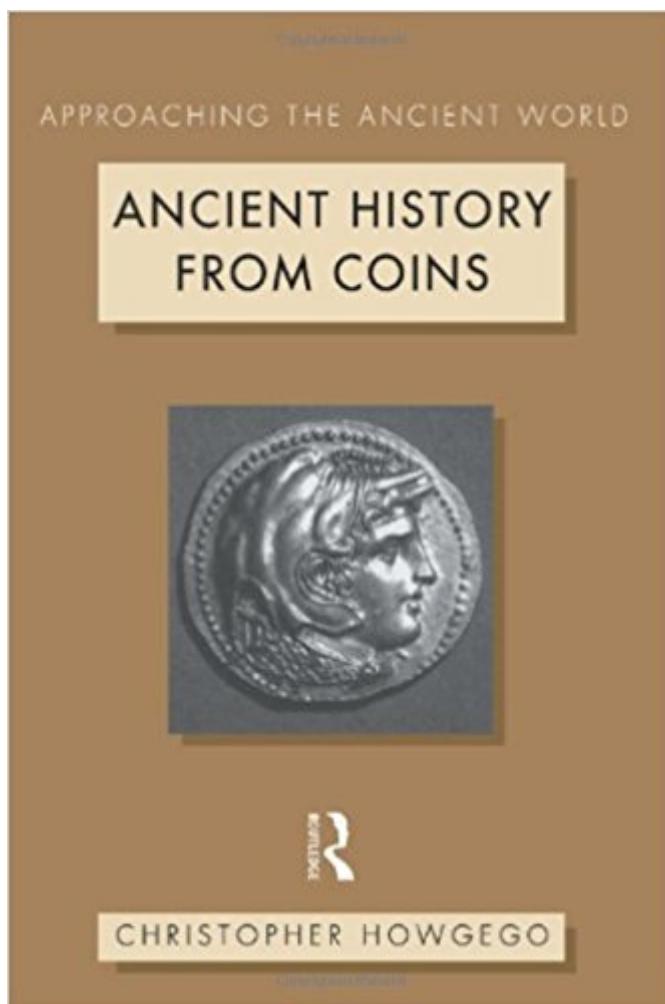


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Ancient History From Coins (Approaching The Ancient World)



Synopsis

Like other volumes in this series, Ancient History from Coins demystifies a specialism, introducing students (from first year upwards) to the techniques, methods, problems and advantages of using coins to do ancient history. Coins are a fertile source of information for the ancient historian; yet too often historians are uneasy about using them as evidence because of the special problems attaching to their interpretation. The world of numismatics is not always easy for the non-specialist to penetrate or understand with confidence. Dr Howgego describes and analyses the main contributions the study of coins can make to ancient history, showing through numerous examples how the character, patterns and behaviour of coinage bear on major historical themes. Topics range from state finance and economic policy to imperial domination and political propaganda through coins types. The period covered by the book is from the invention of coinage (ca 600BC) to AD 400.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

'Vastly informative and always to the point. There is much to be discovered or brought to our attention here' - - Greece and Rome Volume 4

Good solid book on ancient coins and the way they help supplement what we know from historical sources or else serve to fill in the gaps lacking original extant sources. It provides much interesting and pertinent detail, which ought to be appreciated mostly by numismatically-focused readers,

whereas the knowledgeable historical readership will probably find most of this information and the commentary relatively unsurprising.

The upside: authoritative, with high-quality images. The downside: the title is misleadingly comprehensive, as the array of illustrated coins is very limited; and, the text is conspicuously pedantic in style and tone.

The author constantly says one thing then disavows it in the subsequent paragraph. Very annoying and I wondered why he wrote the book if he is unsure of everything.

This book tells everything you've wanted to know, names specifics including sites making the reader want to visit. The writing is perfect, succinct and informative.

Exactly the book I was looking for. And a real bargain to boot. I would recommend to anyone looking here for slightly off the wall titles.

This is not a comment on the substance of the book, but on its adaptation to the Kindle. This is the second book I purchased for my new Kindle 2, and it is not a success. The most annoying problem is with the plates. The book contains numerous photos of coins that are grouped in a single section of plates and referred to in the text through bracketed numbers. However, the references are not hot-linked to the pictures, as could and should have been done in an ebook, and I find it inconvenient to hop back and forth from one section to another on the Kindle. However, that really makes no difference because the pictures are so tiny and reproduced at such low resolution as to be absolutely useless anyway. The book is written in a "scholarly" tone that I find awkward and difficult to read. It seems more intended to anticipate objections of peer experts than to inform the layman. Again, not a comment on substance, but on style. If you intend to buy this book, buy the hard copy version, not the Kindle.

The field of numismatics is one of the most specialized and isolated areas of historical scholarship, and as a result it is probably not used as much as it should be by historians. Coins have special problems associated with their interpretation, but this is true of every other kind of evidence we have (e.g., literary, epigraphic, archaeological). Christopher Howgego's book is intended to demystify the subject of ancient coins and narrow the unwelcome gap between numismatists and other kinds of

historians. Howgego's approach is thematic and covers a 900-year period, and although he deals with a wide range of ancient civilizations, he does not intend for his study to be comprehensive. It differs from similar books in providing a useful summary of modern numismatic research and outlining the major problems of using coins as a historical source. Howgego's book is one of the most useful available on the subject of numismatics and ancient history. The book is divided into six chapters that address various themes and problems associated with coins. The first ("Money") outlines the history of coinage and asks why having a system of coinage mattered to ancient societies. Chapter 2 ("Minting") addresses the production of coins and why they were used. Chapters 3 and 4 ("Empires" and "Politics") form the core of the book, showing how coinage related to broader ideas such as imperialism, power, and politics. Several case studies are used to illustrate the variety of coin use by different societies while developing the convincing central thesis that coins related very strongly to these themes in each of them. The final two chapters ("Circulation" and "Crisis") are fairly technical studies of specifically economic issues such as the devaluation and debasement of coins, inflation, and the problems involved in determining the circulation of coins in antiquity. The overall structure of the book is generally well-defined and organized, though a concluding chapter would be useful in lessening the somewhat fragmentary presentation by summarizing the main ideas. The final two chapters in particular seem a bit out of place due to their more technical and statistical nature, but they might have been better tied into Howgego's main thesis with a general concluding section. Howgego's general presentation and thesis are admittedly difficult to criticize. He makes excellent use of other types of evidence against that of coins to show that no aspect of the surviving evidence should be considered in isolation. An immediately noticeable aspect of his analysis, however, is the general weakness of the Greek side compared with the Roman, but there are possible explanations for this: Howgego is an expert on Roman coins in particular, and the evidence is fuller for Rome than for Greece. Still, this imbalance might have been avoided by allowing a Greek numismatic specialist to handle that part of the study to make it more complete and well-rounded. Still, his coverage of the Hellenistic kingdoms is much better than those in other general studies. Most of the problems of the book are relatively minor and relate to specific points of interpretation or choice of terms. For example, Howgego uses the term "laissez-faire" repeatedly; he might have used a more appropriate definition to make his point without exposing himself to the danger of misleading readers with a modern economic concept. This is a very real danger, particularly in economic studies, and because this book is intended to be an introduction to numismatics he should have avoided it. Many studies of the so-called "ancient economy" depend on modern concepts (most of which cannot be applied to the ancient world), and scholars should strive

to discuss them in terms more appropriate to the eras in question. There is one area where I believe Howgego's analysis to be flawed. In Chapter 4 he writes, "the reduction in the numismatic repertoire [in the early 4th-century] was matched by a decline in sculptural reliefs and portraiture in general. Politics were now at court, there was no longer the same need to appeal to wider groups." The absence of greater quantities of portraiture and sculpture is not because there was no longer such a need to appeal to wider groups, but rather that such things were becoming increasingly expensive in the 3rd and 4th centuries, and money was not as readily available for use on these pieces of imperial propaganda as it once had been. It would be more accurate to say that the need to appeal to wider groups was still very much alive, particularly given the divide between the Christian and pagan aspects of late Roman society. This oversimplifies a very complicated issue, of course, but I think Howgego's analysis here is flawed nonetheless. Such reservations having been mentioned (and there are a few others), it must be emphasized that the good points of this book far outweigh the bad. In presenting the major problems involved in the study of coins and the current state of numismatic research in the more difficult areas, Howgego raises very interesting, important, and difficult questions. This is perhaps the best impact any such book can have, as it opens up new possibilities and avenues for future inquiry. The book raises questions related to economic history, politics, power, autonomy, and so on. Howgego's excellent use of comparative evidence is an example of one of the more profitable modern trends of historical inquiry used in the best way possible, and in doing so he shows that the study of coins is relevant to every period of ancient history. He addresses the political, military, and social realities that are too often left out of studies relating to economic matters, showing that many of these self-contained modern theories, although useful in their own ways, cannot work when the ambiguities and difficulties presented by the ancient world are applied to them. Howgego's approach differs from most of the standard works on ancient numismatics in that he deals with broader historical questions. This book takes the study of numismatics to the next level by refocusing attention on some of the more important considerations that have been left behind as the field of numismatics has grown increasingly specialized. Howgego succeeds admirably in what he sets out to achieve, and his book will likely become one of the most important general studies relating to ancient coins.

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