

Coins and Crises

Now, to continue our investigation of Rome in its imperial period, we'll move on to the most intriguing piece of Roman history you've never heard of. A story broke onto the classical studies scene in late 2022 with splashy headlines, declaring that "a lost Roman emperor" had been rediscovered. But just how Roman, and how real, was this so-called emperor?

He first came to scholars' attention in the 1700s, when a batch of apparently Roman coins was found in a hoard in Transylvania. Several of the coins found in this cache depicted recognized figures from Roman history. A few others, however, depicted an unknown man, whose name, according to the coins' inscriptions, was 'Sponsian'. Various coin collectors initially claimed that this Sponsian was a Roman emperor lost to the vicissitudes of time. But many experts in numismatics, or the study of ancient coins, quickly rejected this idea, labeling the coins as clever forgeries and dismissing the issue.



However, Sponsian made his way back into the limelight when a recent study

of the coins bearing his supposed image reopened the debate. The study, led by Paul Pearson of University College London, and Jesper Ericsson, numismatics coordinator at the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, sparked controversy in the field of classics as to whether the coins—and by extension, the man they picture—were authentic, and what that might mean for our narrative of Roman



history.

Central to the Sponsian controversy are the coins themselves. They are the only evidence we have attesting to Sponsian's existence: nowhere else is he recorded in Roman history, and even the name Sponsian is uncommon, appearing in only one other case as part of a funerary inscription. So, to understand the debate about Sponsian, a little background knowledge about Roman coins is necessary.

Legitimate Roman coins were made with a technique known as '**die-striking**', or the die-struck method. This method would begin with coin-shaped pieces of metal with no design. Then, a metal stamp with the reversed image of the desired design, known as a die, would be used to press the correct image into the face of the blank coin with hammer and anvil. Forgeries of antique coins, by contrast, were generally made with a different method known as '**casting**'. In

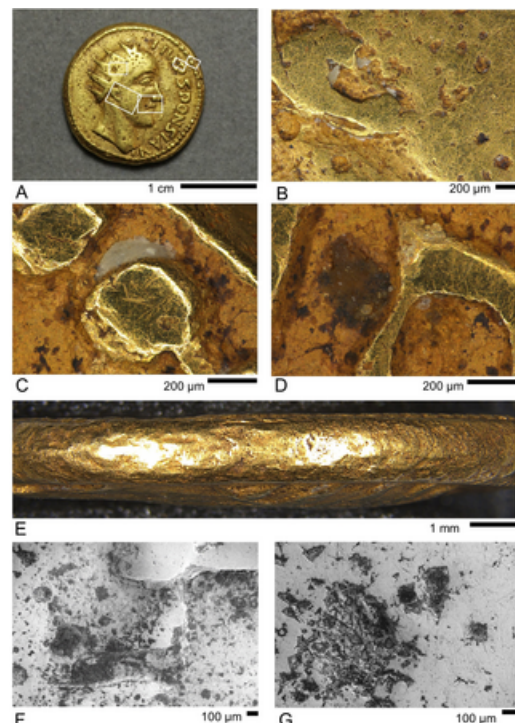
this process, the coinsmith would pour liquid metal into a mold of the appropriate design, so that when the metal cooled and solidified, it would form the proper shape and design.

Although at first glance, the casual observer might not see any difference between a cast coin and a die-struck coin, the two smithing techniques can leave tiny but telltale signs on the pieces they produce. For example, the Sponsian coins display surface imperfections that Pearson's team interpreted as **relict air bubbles** (holes or divots in the metal, caused by air bubbles forming and popping in a coin during the forging process). These bubbles usually indicate that a coin was cast rather than die-struck. The presence of such bubbles, among other manufacturing imperfections, led the 2022 study to identify all the Sponsian coins as cast. The study then further concluded that, as such, the coins must have been fakes, or perhaps a previously-unknown type of authentic ancient coin. Critics of the study, on the other hand, take mold-casting simply as evidence of forgery.

The text of the Sponsian coins has also perplexed researchers. The inscription identifying the supposed emperor is grammatically unusual for Roman coins, if not downright incorrect; it uses the wrong form of the emperor's name. The inscription is also placed oddly, falling entirely to the right of the portrait, rather than spanning the top rim of the coin as was typical. What's more, the Sponsian coins also combine attributes of entirely different time periods. Design elements particular to the Roman Republic are mixed with those characteristic

of the Imperial period on the same coin. Many scholars take these apparent anachronisms as further proof of forgery.

Another piece of evidence under scrutiny by both sides of the argument are the tiny traces of dirt and minerals caked onto the surface of the coins. Pearson's team examined these residues with high-powered microscopes and UV imaging to determine whether they were genuine or faked. The team concluded that the dirt was not artificially applied to the coins to make them seem more authentic, but was instead the result of being buried underground for several hundred years and then dug up again. Pearson's study cites this burial and excavation as definite proof that the coins, and Sponsian, are real.



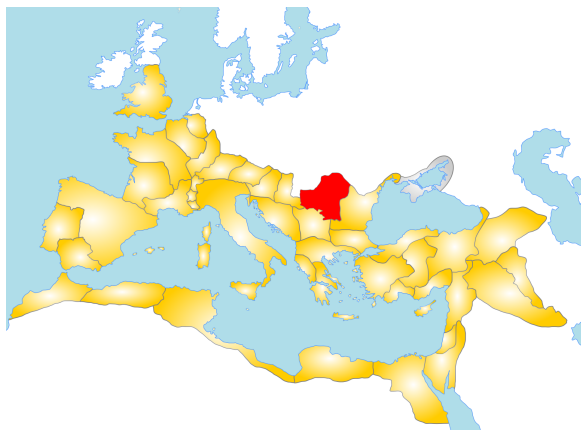
However, many scholars argue that this is not enough to validate the coins for certain, especially when the coins' other peculiarities are weighed in. Critics argue

that the assumption that Sponsian's coins prove his historical identity is flawed, that it uses circular logic and makes circumstantial evidence look like concrete proof.

And finally: what does all of this really *mean*?

The study exalts Sponsian as a crucial rediscovery of under-examined history, while its critics regard it as underdeveloped or misguided scholarship. So what does Sponsian—real or not—do to our understanding of Roman history, and of “history” itself, as the researchers invoke it?

First, we should address the misconception inherent in the claim that Sponsian was a “lost Roman emperor”. Even if we assume that Sponsian and his coins were real, Sponsian wouldn't have been an *emperor* in the way many news outlets, and even occasionally Pearson's study, made him out to be. Rome in the 3rd century, the time period in which Pearson's team placed Sponsian, was in a period of crisis. No one who came to power over the fracturing empire could hold on to that power for very long, and Rome saw the rise and fall of fifty emperors in about as many



years. Pearson's team hypothesizes that Sponsian was a military general who took

political power over Dacia, the region under his control, in order to protect and maintain it when the area was cut off from central Rome in the decade 260 CE.

So, Sponsian may have assumed some partial form of *imperium* (the absolute power held by the Roman emperor) and risen to a position of leadership. He may have presided over a smaller territory isolated from the empire proper. He may even have issued coins, like emperors did, to pay his army with. However, those coins would not have circulated in Rome, and whatever political power Sponsian may have achieved would not have carried to the city of Rome or the main body of the empire. Furthermore, he would likely have fallen from power as quickly as he might have achieved it, given the trends of 3rd century power struggles. Thus, even if Sponsian *were* real, the fervor over his coins likely tells us more about the weight modern historians and audiences place on discoveries of “the past” and contributions to “history”, than about whatever that history may have been.

Based on the evidence, do you think the Sponsian coins are genuine, or forgeries? Do you think Sponsian himself was real? Turn to a classmate and discuss what you think the strongest argument made by each side was, and why you think Sponsian matters (or doesn't!) in the grand scheme of history, both as a narrative and a discipline.

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