

FLAME Regional Bias Series: South Italy

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Geography

The Italian Peninsula is a geographic and political unit, located in Southern Europe, south of the Alps. Italy today consists of the continental territories and two large Mediterranean islands, Sicily and Sardinia. The whole corresponds to the Italian nation. Because of the decentralized nature and large quantity of coin finds from Italy, FLAME has split Italy between different teams working on the north and the south. The present essay focuses on the southern parts of Italy, comprising the administrative subdivisions ("Regioni") of: Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Molise, Apulia, and the insular parts, comprising the regions of Sicily and Sardinia.

The southern areas were affected in ancient times by widespread Greek colonization: After the Roman conquest, and with the Augustan reorganization, it was subdivided into four *Regiones* (*Regio II Apulia et Calabria* and *Regio III Lucania et Bruttii*, and—in part—*Regio I Latium et Campania*, *Regio IV Samnium*), while the two islands were organized as *Provinciae* (*Provincia Sicilia*, *Provincia Sardinia et Corsica*).

With the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, the southern part of Italy became a target for conquest by various entities, starting with the



FIGURE 1

Byzantines who conquered most of the territories, although later the western side would fall under Lombard control and Sicily would subsequently be conquered by Arab peoples from Africa. It was only with the arrival of the Normans and then the Swabians that southern Italy was reunited under a single crown and remained so until the union with the rest of Italy in the 19th century.

Coinage

The Italian monetary landscape, for the chronologies covered by the FLAME Project, reflects the complexity of the historical, political, and administrative events that marked the territory. We thus find evidence of issues of the Western and Eastern Roman Empire, which often circulated here together, but also imitative barbarian coins. Subsequent coins in the region include Byzantine coins from local mints such as Ravenna or Syracuse as well as those issued in other imperial workshops, as well as Lombard and Arab coins.

Legal Aspects

Italian legislation on the discovery and possession of ancient monetary material is quite strict: All recovered finds of archaeological interest (including ancient and medieval coins) are state property. In addition, the search and recovery of such finds by private citizens, e.g., using metal detectors, is prohibited. If a citizen accidentally finds artifacts of archaeological interest, he or she is obliged to immediately inform the authorities in charge of their protection (the local Soprintendenze or the Carabinieri del Nucleo Tutela Patrimonio Culturale) and hand them over. The Italian state offers cash compensation for those who find and hand over such artifacts, but this prize is negligible compared to the much higher profits that could be made from their sale on the antiquities market, which is why a huge mass of artifacts continues to be recovered clandestinely and exported abroad, entering private or even museum collections around the world.¹

The use of modern search tools such as the metal-detector has made this practice of illegally searching for archaeological (and numismatic) artifacts particularly devastating: With the exception of fenced-off archaeological areas equipped with surveillance

¹ Count as a few among many examples: Rome, January 20, 2012 (<https://cultura.gov.it/comunicato/restituiti-dagli-usa-eccezionali-reperti-archeologici-di-provenienza-furtiva-e-da-scavo-illecito-in-italia>); Rome, April 29, 2022 (<https://www.beniculturali.it/comunicato/elmo-ellenistico-restituito-in-olanda-ai-carabinieri-per-la-tutela-del-patrimonio-culturale>); Rome, January 23, 2023 - release no. 17, Press and Communication Office Ministry of Culture (<https://cultura.gov.it/comunicato/24060>).

systems, the entire national territory suffers from such looting, and the reporting and recovery of coin hoards (*tesoretti* in Italian, that is to say "little treasures") is now increasingly rare,² just as many less-controlled archaeological contexts now appear to have been looted and return only a few coins, despite the meritorious efforts of some law enforcement agencies, such as the Carabinieri del Nucleo Tutela Patrimonio Culturale.

National Databases

Italy does not have large collections of data on its national monetary heritage: There is no project for a nationwide database, although, in the past, some printed series had had such aspirations.

This deficiency is being remedied by solid research programs focused on more limited areas, the result of the goodwill of individual scholars or university research groups rather than a national project: A virtuous case to be considered is that of the "Project for Computer Cataloguing of the Numismatic Heritage of the Veneto Region," directed by Giovanni Gorini (University of Padua).

The large public coin collections themselves suffer from a lack of cataloguing and publication of their holdings, which they are trying to remedy through ongoing work inventorying their numismatic holdings: This is the case with the publication of the *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum* of the Archaeological Museum of Florence, or the inventorying projects at museums like the National Archaeological Museum of Taranto, or the Archaeological Regional Museum of Palermo. In the case of the collection of the National Roman Museum, the largest in Italy with its 750,000 specimens, although partial studies of particular classes of coins have been conducted, the reference catalog remains that of the *Corpus Nummorum Italicorum* published in the first half of the 19th century. On the other hand, personal initiatives such as that of Ermanno Arslan's *Repertorio dei Ritrovamenti di Moneta Altomedievale (489-1002)*, and Luca Gianazza's *Inventory of Coin Finds/Repertorio dei ritrovamenti monetari* (published online) are based on the friendly collaboration of fellow scholars, so they suffer from the "regionality" of the information, with some areas in which there is more information, counterbalanced by other areas characterized by lacunae.

² The number of Greek coin hoards founded in Apulia, for example, in the second half of the last century is about ten, compared with 43 in the first half of the same century: data from the "Inventory of Greek Coin Hoards" (<http://coinhoards.org/>) compared with the news in our possession about more recent coin finds.

Recovery Biases — Generality of Data

The main problem that FLAME users researching Italian contexts might face is the lack of contextual information: Many of the documents—especially the oldest ones—that refer to coin finds are often limited to a generic indication of the location of the find, and to a list, in many cases very short, of the coins found. This often results in the data included in FLAME being limited to a catalogue of coins, sorted by date of issue, while the information on the contexts of their discovery is very scarce, being reduced to a generic reference to the chronological range in which the context in which the coins were found was located. This “original sin” in data collection will inevitably have repercussions on the quality of the data: Frequency tables will refer to the date of issue and not to the time when these coins left circulation because they were lost or hidden. This will often give a distorted picture of monetary circulation in the area under consideration.

The other gap that we would like to highlight is in the scarcity of information related to the type of context: That is, whether the coins came from a sacred, or commercial, funerary, urban, or rural context, etc. This leads one to consider coins that had totally different functions as a unitary nucleus.

The possibility of directly viewing numismatic materials is not always feasible and varies greatly depending on the institution storing the coin finds. In Italy there is still a strong academic parochialism, which jealously binds scholars to their data. It is extremely difficult to access new information since scholars are not willing to share it (fearing that others might steal their data). For this reason it has often proven difficult to obtain even the minimal information required for entries in the FLAME database, despite having pointed out that this minimal set of information (devoid of weight data or images) absolutely would not deprive their studies of information of “strategic” relevance (indeed if anything FLAME provides a broader channel for publicizing their work-in-progress).

With reference to this difficulty in exchanging new information with colleagues, however, we must counterpose some positive developments: In some cases there has been an acceleration, especially concerning the centuries on which the FLAME project dwells, in the presentation of new medieval, numismatic data in some of the Museums of Southern Italy (a meritorious case is that of the National Archaeological Museum of Taranto, which is editing the volume in a series of books of the ancient and medieval hoards kept in its collection).