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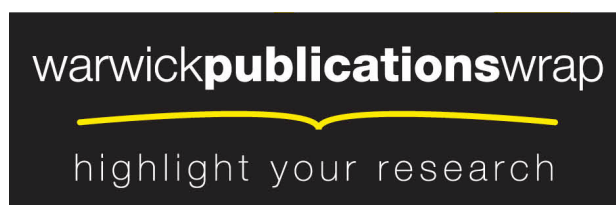
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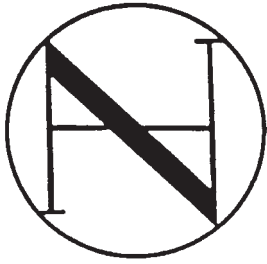
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*Front cover:* Sirinos/Pyxoes, incuse stater c540-510BC (not to scale). See article "An incuse stater from the series 'Sirinos/Pyxoes' "

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# Victory, torcs and iconology in Rome and Britain

Clare Rowan and David Swan

## Abstract

*This article takes an iconological approach to the interpretation of coin imagery, highlighting the multiple, changing meanings of images as they travel from person to person and culture to culture. Two contrasting case studies are presented. The first discusses the movement of classical images to Iron Age Britain, focusing on the figure of Nike/Victory. The selective nature of image-adoption by British kings is demonstrated, as well as the different meanings Mediterranean classical images communicated in their new context. The second case study discusses the adoption of the torc as both an image and object in Roman culture, tracing how the torc transformed from a 'barbarian' attribute to a demonstration of Roman military valour and skill. Both case studies demonstrate the multiple meanings a coin image may have, dependant on viewer and context.\**

## Keywords

[Iron Age Britain] [Rome] [torc] [iconology] [social life of images] [Victory]

*A picture is less like a statement or speech act, then, than like a speaker capable of an infinite number of utterances. An image is not a text to be read but a ventriloquist's dummy into which we project our own voice.*

J.W.T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want?* (Chicago, 2005) 140

Mitchell's statement, symbolic of the approach practised within iconology, challenges the traditional interpretative framework of the numismatist. Coin imagery is often understood as a statement or speech act, with particular images communicating specific, even targeted, messages. However work within visual culture studies has increasingly begun to recognise that, just as there is a social life of objects, so too we can chart the social lives of images. Images might travel between cultures, objects or media, generating

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new meanings, associations and ways of seeing the world.<sup>1</sup> As an image moves from one medium to another (perhaps becoming a mental or verbal image for a time), or as the medium carrying an image (in this case a coin) physically travels from user to user and context to context, the meanings of the image transform. How can numismatists incorporate these perspectives? This article explores what an *iconological* approach to the study of numismatic iconography might look like.<sup>2</sup>

Ancient coins and their types passed from person to person, were taken out and put away, flowing between users, contexts and cultures. How did this social life affect the meaning of a coin's imagery, and how, in turn, did the movement of images actively contribute to the formation of identities and ideas? Two case studies are presented as a means of exploring these questions, tracing the movement of images to and from the Roman world. The first case study follows the image of the goddess Victory as it moves from Roman to British Iron Age coinage. The second case study takes the 'torc-wreath' carried by Victory on these Iron Age British coins as a starting point to consider the broader social life of the torc within the Roman world. Both case studies demonstrate the interconnectedness of the Mediterranean in antiquity, and the entangled web of meanings that (coin) imagery potentially possessed.

### **The Imagery of Success: Victory in Pre-Roman Britain**

Images and myths play a significant role in the identity of a civilization, representing not only how a society sees itself, but also how it sees its place in the world.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, when a society adopts the images of another culture (mythical or otherwise), a significant statement is being made. Such is the case in pre-Roman Britain. After over a century of striking coinage depicting local plants and animals (e.g. boars), from c. 25 BC the inhabitants in the south-east of the island began to represent mythical creatures on their coins, images that had travelled to Britain from the Mediterranean. These included Medusa, the sphinx, the winged horse and the griffon, creatures previously unknown to the indigenous culture of the time.<sup>4</sup> The representation of these creatures was seen as an attempt by British rulers to appeal to the Roman state until Creighton identified that it was not the most common classical images that were being copied, rather the British

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1 On object biography see I. Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process' in A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986) 64-94, and J. Joy, 'Reinvigorating object biography: reproducing the drama of object lives' *World Archaeology* 41 (2009) 540-56. For the social life of images see W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* (Chicago, 2005) 90-3.

2 See also C. Rowan (a), 'Coinage between cultures: mediating power in Roman Macedonia' in P. Basu (ed.), *The In-Betweenness of Things: Materializing Mediation and Movement between Worlds* (London, forthcoming), and C. Rowan (b), 'Imagining Empire under the Republic' in F. Haymann, W. Hollstein & M. Jehne (eds), *Neue Forschungen zur Münzprägung der Römischen Republik* (Dresden, forthcoming).

3 J. Creighton, *Coins and Power in Late Iron Age Britain* (Cambridge, 2000) 80

4 ABC 1076, ABC 2909, ABC 2943, ABC 2987

were selective in which imagery they adopted.<sup>5</sup> British kings would have absorbed Roman visual culture during their time in Rome as hostages, but the overwhelming quantity of imagery in Rome on both public and private monuments would have meant that it would only take a brief visit to Rome to witness classical imagery.<sup>6</sup> This suggests that despite having access to the entire repertoire of Roman images, the inhabitants of Britain adopted only those images that appealed to their own interests and culture. They spoke the Roman ‘language of images’ differently.

The following discussion focuses on the representation of Victory (or Nike) on British coins of the early first century AD. Victory was popular with British moneyers of this period, appearing on the most common coins produced under the south-eastern king Cunobelin (ABC 2918 & 2972). She is also portrayed on a comparatively high number of types: fourteen types of four different British kings. What follows is an exploration of how the British may have seen Roman Victory, and why she might have been more appealing than other Roman divinities. The appearance of Victory on coins of the south-east in this period is outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The Representation of Victory on coins of SE Britain in the early first century AD

Catalogue Number (ABC)	Description	Diameter (mm)	Weight (g)	Rarity based on finds <sup>7</sup>
387	Gold stater of Eppillus c. AD 1-15 Obv: Winged Victory standing l. in wreath holding palm branch in l. hand and torc/wreath in raised r. hand. Rev: EPPI.COM F Warrior on horse r., holding carnyx.	18	5.4	excessively rare
414	Bronze unit of Eppillus c. AD 1-15 Obv: laureate bust l., EPPI[L] in front. Rev: Winged Victory standing l., holding spear in r. hand and wreath/torc in l.	16	1.9	very rare

5 J. Creighton *op.cit.* 84; M. Russell & S. Laycock, *Unroman Britain* (Stroud, 2010) 39

6 J. Creighton *op.cit.* 92, P. Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor, 2009) 27, 245

7. Information taken from the *Celtic Coin Index*.



<b>Catalogue Number (ABC)</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Diameter (mm)</b>	<b>Weight (g)</b>	<b>Rarity based on finds<sup>7</sup></b>
432	Silver unit of Touto c. AD 10-15 Obv: Bearded head l., wearing diadem, TOVTO before. Rev: Winged Victory walking r., r. hand on scabbarded sword, E to left, P to right.	12	1.3	excessively rare
1130	Silver unit of Tincomarus 25 BC – AD 10 Obv: CO F within wreath. Rev: Victory r., with laurel branch in l. hand and torc/wreath in r., altar r. with snake. TIN around.	?	? <sup>8</sup>	excessively rare
1349	Silver unit of Epaticcus c. AD 20-40 Obv: Victory seated r., holding torc/wreath in l. hand. TASCIO around. Rev: Boar r., tree behind. EPAT below.	12	1.3	scarce
2855	Silver unit of Cunobelin c. AD 10-40 Obv: Head l., CAMV[L] in front. Rev: Seated Victory r., wearing broad rimmed cap, holding wine cup in r. hand, CVNO below chair.	15	1.2	very rare
2870	Silver unit of Cunobelin c. AD 10-40 Obv: Winged bust r. Rev: Sphinx sitting l. TASCIO in front.	13	1.2	scarce
2882	Silver unit of Cunobelin c. AD 10-40 Obv: Female bust r., CVNO behind, BELINVS before. Rev: Winged Victory standing on globe, torc/wreath in r. hand.	13	1.3	very rare
2918	Bronze unit of Cunobelin c. AD 10-40 Obv: CVNOBELINI in two panels, pellets in ring above and below. Rev. Seated Victory l., TASC [F] in exergue.	16	1.7	common

<sup>8</sup> Unknown owing to rarity of the type.



Catalogue Number (ABC)	Description	Diameter (mm)	Weight (g)	Rarity based on finds <sup>7</sup>
2921	Bronze unit of Cunobelin c. AD 10-40 Obv: Winged horse l., head turned back, CAM below. Rev: Victory standing l., CVN in front.	15	2.9	scarce
2927	Bronze unit of Cunobelin c. AD 10-40 Obv: Winged horse l., CAMV below. Rev: Victory standing r., holding torc/wreath in r. hand. CV to l., MV to r.	16	2.9	rare
2930	Bronze unit of Cunobelin c. AD 10-40 Obv: Victory standing. C to l., V to r. Rev: Warrior on horse r., CVN below.	17	3.2	very rare
2939	Bronze unit of Cunobelin c. AD 10-40 Obv: Ship, CVN below. Rev: Victory walking r., S to l., E to r.	17	4.1	extremely rare
2972	Bronze unit of Cunobelin c. AD 10-40 Obv: Winged horse r., CV above. Rev: Victory stabbing bull r. TASCII below.	14	2.2	very common

Before the adoption of the image from the Roman world, a winged deity was unknown in British iconography. In the broader Celtic pantheon of the European mainland, which often inspired British religion, there is evidence of a winged female deity, but depictions are confined to Avallon in France, and show the deity with more than two breasts, quite unlike the classically inspired Victory on British coins.<sup>9</sup> The image of Victory, therefore, was taken from the Roman world. For the Romans Victory could represent a specific victory in battle or represent general military success.<sup>10</sup> The goddess may also have served as a means of presenting war in an abstract manner, devoid of its associated horrors, and so Victory can also be associated with war itself.<sup>11</sup>

But the transferral of the image of Victory from one culture to another may have led to a shift in meaning, and the Roman associations of the goddess may not have been apparent to British viewers. In a similar manner to Roman depictions, Victory is often

9 M. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art* (London, 1989) 27

10 J. Creighton *op.cit.* 108

11 M. Koortbojian, 'The bringer of Victory: imagery and institutions at the advent of Empire' in *Representations of War in Ancient Rome*, eds. S. Dillon & K.E. Welch (Cambridge, 2006) 185

represented alone on pre-Roman British coinage, without reference to an enemy. It is therefore difficult to judge whether Victory in these contexts represented a specific success or battle. Indeed, the Romans had a conceptualisation of coinage as a ‘monument in miniature’ that may not have been replicated in Iron Age Britain. Meadows and Williams have demonstrated that the Roman association of money was connected to the temple close to where coinage was produced, the temple of Juno Moneta.<sup>12</sup> Moneta was associated with memory, and as a result, the images on coinage were a visual representation of a past event, and a form of maintaining that memory. Without any similar connections, it seems doubtful that the British would have seen money in this way, and thus the representation of particular events would be improbable. Therefore, it seems likely that they did not use Victory to commemorate a specific conflict.



Figure 1: AE unit, Cunobelin, AD 10-40, 15.69mm, 2.51g. Obverse: Winged horse, r., CVNO below. Reverse: Victory stabbing bull, r. TASCII (ABC 2972, Reproduced courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme: Williams, D (2011) SUR-14A066: A IRON AGE COIN Web page available at: <https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/471949> [Accessed: Oct 9, 2015 4:57:09 PM])

Victory is shown with another creature on only one type, which displays Victory attacking a bull on the reverse (Fig. 1). This is one of the most common types of Cunobelin, a king whose kingdom covered parts of the counties of Essex, Hertfordshire and Kent. As the only example where Victory is presented with another creature, we might deduce that here success over a rival was communicated. However, there is no obvious candidate for who or what the bull might represent. Perhaps it was the symbol or even the name of a rival king now lost to history. Cunobelin’s own name means “Hound of Belinus”, so this is a possibility.<sup>13</sup> However, such a theory simply does not have the evidence to support it. The bull likely had another meaning.

12 J. Williams & A. Meadows, ‘Moneta and the monuments: coinage and politics in Republican Rome’ *Journal of Roman Studies* 91 (2001) 48

13 M. Russell, *Bloodline: The Celtic Kings of Roman Britain* (Stroud, 2010) 60

It is likely that the coin type was inspired by the sacrificial bull imagery that became increasingly common in Roman art during the Augustan era.<sup>14</sup> Morris identifies the prototype of Cunobelin's issue as a Roman imperial type struck at Pergamon from 19 BC.<sup>15</sup> However, whilst the type was inspired by Mediterranean visual culture, framed within British customs it takes on a new meaning. The bull was a prominent image in British art, both on coins and elsewhere. Indeed, horns themselves were seen as symbols of power, often incorporated into helmets and deities, and Irish literature such as the Ulster Cycle mentions bulls having supernatural powers.<sup>16</sup> Therefore the bull was seen as a powerful beast, and by presenting Victory in the act of subduing this beast, Victory too is presented as powerful. This would suggest that both the Romans and the British saw the winged goddess as a martial figure. Indeed, this is emphasised on other British coin types such as ABC 414 and ABC 432, which show Victory carrying, respectively, a spear and a sword, so the winged deity's relation to war seems to have been adopted alongside the imagery.



Figure 2: AR unit, Britain, AD 10-40, 1.13g, Cunobelin. Obverse: Head, l, spiky hair, [CAMVL] in front. Reverse: Seated Victory, r., wearing broad rimmed cap and holding bowl or wine cup in r. hand, pellet in annulet before, CVNO below chair (ABC 2855, Reproduced courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme: McLean, L (2009) ESS-42A011: A IRON AGE COIN Web page available at: <https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/246674> [Accessed: Oct 9, 2015 5:01:01 PM])

But the British people also had an association with the image of the winged goddess that was not present in Rome. As mentioned above, Victory could refer to general (often military) success. In Britain, however, we see a different form of success being portrayed. Figure 2 is another issue of Cunobelin; here Victory is portrayed in a very different manner, wearing a *petasus*, the broad rimmed travelling cap, and holding what appears to be a wine cup. The *petasus* is often associated with Mercury, the Roman messenger god of commerce, so its inclusion may have been an attempt to affiliate the two deities.<sup>17</sup>

14 S.J. Green, 'Save our Cows? Augustan Discourse and Animal Sacrifice in Ovid's "Fasti"' *Greece and Rome* 55 (2008) 43

15 F. Morris, 'Cunobelinus' Bronze Coinage' *Britannia* 44 (2013) 41; RIC 1<sup>2</sup> 514

16 M. Green, *op.cit.* 151, A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London, 1974) 172

17 J. Creighton, *op.cit.* 186

It has even been suggested that the winged deity on this type may in fact be male, but this is not easily visible, and owing to the prominence of the figure's wings, it seems that this was the feature being emphasised, thus the figure likely relates to the other, female, winged figures depicted on other British coins.<sup>18</sup> The wine cup is also related to commerce, as archaeological finds of amphorae indicate wine was a conspicuous Roman import of this period.<sup>19</sup> Therefore this representation of Victory seems to be associated with commerce, and thus perhaps represents commercial success. Victory is also shown with a *petasus* on specimens of another issue of Cunobelin, ABC 2918.<sup>20</sup> A similar use of Victory can be seen in the Roman province of Germania Superior, where Victory was used by local populations to demonstrate their domestic success via the acquisition of Roman material culture.<sup>21</sup>

Other British coin types display Victory as a symbol of success. On six of the fourteen British types where Victory is depicted, she holds a circular object in the air.<sup>22</sup> To a Roman observer, this would be viewed as a wreath, a symbol of military success. However, to a British observer, the circular object could be interpreted as a torc, the famous jewellery of the Celts (Fig. 3).<sup>23</sup> This is most apparent on Figure 4: the object held up by Victory is unlike the wreath represented on Roman coins. There appears to be a gap on the far right of the cirlet, and it appears to end in "buffers", similar to those of the torc shown in Figure 3.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the wreath appears to have been converted so that an Iron Age viewer would identify it as a torc, an object worn by both men and women, with multivalent associations.<sup>25</sup> Such expressions were not always so overt: Figure 5 shows Victory holding up a circular object that does not appear to have a gap, suggesting it was not intended to depict a torc. However, for a British viewer of the image, the most common circular object they might be aware of would be the torc

18 *Ibid*

19 B. Cunliffe, *Iron Age Communities in Britain* (London, 1978) 158

20 See Spink Auction 1011, lot 148, British Museum R.12760, R.12759, TC,p14.12.Cun, PAS ESS-42A011 and NMGW-F3F776

21 R. Kousser, 'Conquest and desire: Roman *Victoria* in public and provincial sculpture' in *Representations of War in Ancient Rome*, eds. S. Dillon & K.E. Welch (Cambridge, 2006) 221. The goddess Rosmerta is also often shown with attributes of Mercury (purse, caduceus) in Romano-British and Gallo-Roman contexts. See A. Aldhouse-Green, *An Archaeology of Images: Iconology and Cosmology in Iron Age and Roman Europe* (London, 2004) 63.

22 ABC 387, 414, 1130, 1349, 2882, 2927

23 J. Creighton, *op.cit.* 109

24 Also see the specimen from Timeline Auctions, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2014, lot 1312 (<http://www.timelineauctions.com/lot/catuvellauni-cunobelin-seated-victory-unit/35493/>).

25 A. Aldhouse-Green, *op.cit.* 40-7, 58, and Dio 62.2.1-4 (the torc of Boudicea). A potin coin of the Remi depicts what has been interpreted as a female warrior, carrying a torc in her right hand and a spear in her left.

rather than the wreath, so it is fair to suggest that most British viewers would identify it as a torc, despite the intentions of the die engraver.



Figure 3. Ipswich Torc, gold, c. 150-50 BC, diameter 202mm, 1044.1g. (© The Trustees of the British Museum, 1969,0103.2)



Figure 4. AR unit, Britain, AD 10-40, 1.21g, Cunobelin. Obverse: Female bust, r. CVNO behind, BELINVS in front. Reverse: Winged Victory standing on globe, torc in r. hand, TAS behind, CIIOV in front. (ABC 2882, Reproduced courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme: Coin Index, C (2010) CCI-963154: A IRON AGE COIN Web page available at: <https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/305337> [Accessed: Oct 12, 2015 11:13:34 AM])





Figure 5. AV stater, Britain, AD c. 1-15, 5.40g, Eppillus. Obverse: Winged Victory standing l. in wreath, holding wreath in r. hand. Reverse: Warrior on horse r., holding carnyx in r. hand. EPPICOM F below (ABC 387, Reproduced courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme: Coin Index, C (2010) CCI-690226: A IRON AGE COIN Web page available at: <https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/318994> [Accessed: Oct 9, 2015 5:03:44 PM])

Scholars have often interpreted the torc as a symbol of authority; its association with Victory therefore presents her as an entity of power associated with success.<sup>26</sup> There is even some evidence for the torc being related to commerce. In parts of ancient Germania the torc is thought to have acted as a form of currency, as torcs have been found that are exactly one hundred times the weight of coined staters in that area.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, the Celtic horned god Cernunnos, believed to be associated with commerce, is sometimes depicted with a torc instead of a coin purse, implying that both torc and coins were seen as forms of wealth.<sup>28</sup> While there is no strong evidence the torc was used as a form of currency in Britain, many golden torcs discovered in Ipswich, some weighing over one thousand grams of gold, certainly suggest the torc was a highly valuable item, and thus an excellent metaphor for wealth. Nevertheless, the representation of Victory with overt Mercury-style regalia indicates that Victory was seen as having a potential commercial role, and viewers may have brought this association to other Victory representations.

Therefore there seems to be a case for Victory being associated with commercial success in Britain. On multiple types she is carrying something related to a form of wealth. Another coin of Cunobelin, ABC 2939, could also potentially be seen in this light, as the obverse carries a ship and the reverse Victory, perhaps suggesting a connection between the goddess and maritime trade. British rulers in this period may thus have used the image of Victory to show success in the acquisition of desirable Roman imports. Indeed, Caesar writes that the Celtic Gauls worshipped Mercury above all others, declaring him

26 J. Creighton, *op.cit.* 186 ; D. Fickett-Wilbar, 'Cernunnos: Looking a Different Way' *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 23 (2003) 95

27 D. Nash, *Coinage in the Celtic World* (London, 1987) 51

28 D. Fickett-Wilbar, *op.cit.* 95

the inventor of all arts (*omnium inventorem artium ferunt*), with numerous images of the god in existence.<sup>29</sup> Caesar's comment here might find support in the fact that Mercury was the most commonly depicted god in the later Roman province.<sup>30</sup> Commerce was thus a key field of concern for a Celtic god, suggesting why Victory may have been adapted in this way, and meaning that these associations of Victory would be welcome to British viewers.

### The Hybrid Nature of Victory

*Brennus, the king of the Gauls, on entering a temple found no dedications of gold or silver, and when he came only upon images of stone and wood he laughed at them, to think that men, believing that gods have human form, should set up their images in wood and stone.*  
Diodorus Siculus 22.9.4

In tracing the social life of images we need to ask: why are some images more popular than others? Why do some move and appear to take on a life of their own, while others do not? Why, in the words of Mitchell, do some images 'have legs'?<sup>31</sup> In pre-Roman Britain, what was it about the image of Victory that made it more appealing than Jupiter, or other imagery from the classical world?

Victory was something of an anomaly within Roman religion, as, unlike the rest of the Roman pantheon, she was not strictly anthropomorphic. Very few Roman deities were represented with animal features such as wings or horns, perhaps because the Romans did not consider animals to be divine.<sup>32</sup> The conception of what a divine being should look like was very different in the Celtic pantheon. The passage of Diodorus above, describing the Gallic assault on Delphi in 280 BC encapsulates this: the Celts did not conceive the divine as having a human form, and mocked the Greeks for their beliefs. Diodorus Siculus may have included the extract to demonstrate the 'barbaric' nature of the sanctuary's attackers, but the story probably developed from Graeco-Roman knowledge surrounding the nature of Celtic gods.<sup>33</sup> Within pre-Roman Britain depictions of a horned god are one of the most prominent forms of religious art, suggesting the British often conceived their divinities as having non-human physical features.<sup>34</sup> The depiction of human-headed dogs from Lydney in Gloucestershire and cat-eared humans from Caerwent in Monmouthshire support the idea that hybrid

29 Caes. *BGall.* 6.17

30 M. Green, *op.cit.* 216

31 W.J.T. Mitchell, *op.cit.* 31, 87

32 M. Green, *op.cit.* 89

33 It should be noted that the idea that the divine could not be represented by an image (human or otherwise) is a concept also seen in classical literature. Plut. *Num.* 8.7-8 states that initially Numa forbade the Romans to represent the divine in the image of a beast or human. See M. Aldhouse-Green, *op.cit.* 9 for a discussion.

34 A. Ross, *op.cit.* 172



images were present within Britain.<sup>35</sup> Cat-eared humans decorated some of the antefixes at a legionary fortress in Caerleon; that even some post-conquest Roman deities were adjusted into this tradition can also be demonstrated by the Gosbecks Mercury now in the Colchester Castle Museum, which has had his winged cap removed, but the wings themselves have remained, making it appear as if the wings are coming from his head.

Anthropomorphic representations of deities did occur in pre-Roman Britain, so one should not conclude that hybrid deities were the only way the divine was represented.<sup>36</sup> However, it seems that the images ‘with legs’ in this region were those with hybrid components; deities that had some animal element were more attractive. Only five Iron Age British coin types show classical anthropomorphic deities: these are Jupiter, Neptune and Hercules (and possibly Diana), and these types are reasonably rare.<sup>37</sup> This is in direct contrast to the significant numbers of coins bearing classically inspired hybrid animals, such as centaurs, winged horses, griffons, sphinxes, Medusas, capricorns and hippocamps. The only other foreign deities to be produced on types as common as those bearing Victory are the two-headed Janus and Zeus Ammon.<sup>38</sup> Both of these deities would have fitted well with the idea, recorded by Diodorus, that the Celts preferred deities that did not look like humans. Indeed, Zeus Ammon would probably have been associated with the horned god of the British, as both portray a human figure with horns. Therefore, it seems likely that Victory was chosen as a deity to be prominently depicted because her hybrid nature meant she was able to fit the criteria of a British divine being.

### **From ‘barbarian’ to ‘Roman’: The iconology of the torc in the Roman world**

Just as the classical image of the goddess Victory travelled from Rome to Britain, gaining new associations even as it retained original meaning(s), so too non-classical objects and images travelled to Rome. This section focuses on one such object, the torc, and explores how, like the arrival of Victory in Britain, this image became imbued with meaning particular to the culture that adopted it. The torc, as an object and an image, had multiple meanings both within and outside Roman society. As Roman coins displaying torcs circulated, some, all, or perhaps none of these associations may have been apparent to different users. As part of its social life the torc transformed from something associated with ‘barbarians’ to something ‘Roman’. This transition complicates the appearance of the torc outside of Rome, for example the Victory carrying torc types of pre-Roman

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35 M. Aldhouse-Green, *op.cit.* 169-172, Ross *op.cit.* 383

36 A. Ross, *op.cit.* 383

37 ABC 474, 2840, 2864, 2879, 29062. The depiction of Hercules wearing a lion-skin does, however, give him an animal-like attribute.

38 ABC 2978, 2981, 2984

Britain. The British kings would also have witnessed a ‘Roman’ context for the object, meaning that its appearance cannot necessarily be simply classified as a ‘local’ reference.

In his *ab Urbe condita* Livy recounts an incident stemming from one of the legendary genealogies of the Roman Republican nobility. During a conflict against the Gauls in 361 BC, an individual Gaul ‘of extraordinary size’ challenged the Romans to single combat. The Romans were reportedly less than enthusiastic to take on this giant, but one Titus Manlius (cos. 347 BC) volunteered and defeated his rival. What follows next is significant. Livy reports that he did nothing to the body of his defeated foe except he took as spoils (*spoliavit*) the Gaul’s torc ‘which, spattered with blood, he enclosed around his own neck’. The accompanying shouts of the Roman soldiers included the phrase *Torquatus*, and so, Livy writes, this became Manlius’ *cognomen*, and remained the surname of his descendants.<sup>39</sup>

The story marks a transition point: the torc was no longer only associated with ‘barbarian’ Gauls in the Roman mind, but acquired a connection with the Manlii Torquati. As with the use of Victory in Britain, the association that the image acquired is unique to the culture that adopted it, in this instance shaped by the significant emphasis on ancestry amongst the Roman elite. Having defeated the giant Gaul, Manlius had also ‘conquered’ his opponent’s most symbolic object: the torc. A similar phenomenon occurred during the German occupation of the Channel Islands in WWII: the imagery carried on the local currency (Guernsey and Jersey crests, as well as the king’s portrait) was seen by the German occupiers as rightfully ‘theirs’, conquered along with the territory.<sup>40</sup> Local coins were sent back to Germany as souvenirs, or converted into trench art, even as local residents used these same images (and coins) in hidden acts of resistance. The same image (for example the king’s portrait) thus came to possess two simultaneous and yet contradictory associations; meaning would change according to context and user. We see this ‘conquest’ of imagery elsewhere in the Roman Republic: the appropriation of the Macedonian shield by the Metelli, for example, or the triskeles by the Marcelli.<sup>41</sup>

As so nicely outlined by Livy, within the Republic the torc might refer to Gallic or Celtic people (indeed, the ‘dying Gaul’ now in the Capitoline Museum in Rome demonstrates the continued association of the object with barbarians), but it was also a symbol of the Manlii Torquati. This is most evident on coinage: when one of the Torquati *gens* becomes a moneyer in the Republic, a torc appears on his types, acting as both a canting symbol

39 Livy 7.10. The story is also told in Dio 7 (=Zonaras 7.24), Val. Max. 3.26, and Gell. *NA* 9.13, amongst others. On the passage of Livy see S. Oakley, *A Commentary on Livy Books VI-X Vol. II: Books VII-VIII* (Oxford, 1998) 113-48.

40 G. Carr, ‘Coins, crests and kings: symbols of identity and resistance in the Occupied Channel Islands’ *Journal of Material Culture* 17 (2012) 327-44.

41 C. Rowan (a) *op.cit.*, and C. Rowan (b) *op.cit.*

and a reference to the moneyer's legendary ancestry. The torc first appears on Roman coinage in c. 211-208 BC as a symbol on an otherwise anonymous victoriatius.<sup>42</sup> Whether a Manlius Torquatus is behind this issue cannot be known, but all later occurrences are struck by moneyers connected to the *gens*, with each moneyer using the torc as a border. Lucius Manlius Torquatus struck denarii in 113/12 BC (Fig. 6) and another moneyer of the same name minted in 65 BC (Fig. 7).<sup>43</sup> A torc also appears on the issues of one D. Iunius Silanus in 91 BC, who was also related to the Manlii Torquati (Fig. 8).<sup>44</sup> Decimus Junius Silanus adopted the son of T. Manlius Torquatus in 160 BC (the first known instance of the adoption of a patrician into a plebeian family); later a D. Iunius Silanus Manlianus was punished by his father, T. Manlius Torquatus, for misconduct in Macedonia.<sup>45</sup> The adoption of a patrician into a plebeian family appears to have resulted in the transfer of the Torquati's legendary ancestry, and associated imagery, to the Iunii Silani (at least, this is what the numismatic evidence suggests). The Manlii Torquati appear to have died out by the reign of Nero, and the cognomen Torquatus was then adopted by the Iunii Silani.<sup>46</sup>



Figure 6: AR denarius, mint of Rome, 113/12 BC, 3.83g. L. Manlius Torquatus moneyer. Obverse: Helmeted head of Roma, ROMA X. Torc as border. Reverse: Horseman charging left, Q above, border of dots. L TORQVA EX S C. (RRC 295/1, Reproduced courtesy of the American Numismatic Society, 1974.26.13, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1974.26.13>)

42 RRC 91/1b

43 RRC 295/1, 411/1a-b. A Torquatus was also moneyer under Sulla (82 BC, RRC 367/1-4), but no torc can be seen on his types, probably a result of the nature of these issues: they honored Sulla, with no space for familial references.

44 RRC 337/1a-2f

45 Cic. *Fin.* 1.24, see also Tac. *Ann.* 3.69.9, and J.F. Mitchell, 'The Torquati' *Historia* 15 (1966) 23-5

46 J.F. Mitchell, *op.cit.* 23



Figure 7: AR denarius, mint of Rome, 65 BC, 3.84g, L. Manlius Torquatus moneyer. Obverse: Head of Sibyl, wearing an ivy-wreath, SIBYLLA, dotted border. Reverse: Tripod, upon which is an amphora; star on either side of the amphora. L. TORQVAT III VIR. All within torc border. (RRC 411/1b, Reproduced courtesy of the American Numismatic Society, 1937.158.181, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1937.158.181>)



Figure 8: AR denarius, mint of Rome, 91 BC, D. Iunius Silanus, moneyer. Obverse: Mask of bearded Silenus, plough below, torc as border. Reverse: Victory in biga right, holding palm branch and reins in right hand and whip in left, carnyx below. D SILANVS L F. Border of dots. (RRC 337/1a, Reproduced courtesy of the American Numismatic Society, 1937.158.71, <http://numismatics.org/collection/1937.158.71>)

Torcs are listed amongst the precious metal items carried in Roman triumphal parades, and from at least 89 BC they also formed part of the *dona militaria*, the honours presented to soldiers who had performed well in battle.<sup>47</sup> Östenberg observes that from 130 BC onwards torcs cease to be mentioned as booty carried in triumph; she concludes that perhaps the adoption of the torc as a Roman military honour meant the objects were no longer valued, nor paraded, as spoils of war. Their meaning had changed.<sup>48</sup> This may also be the reason that the torc was never used in the commemoration of Gallic victories in the later Republican or Imperial period: the coinage of Caesar, for example, does not use the torc to communicate his conquests in Gaul, and the torc does not appear on the coinage of the Roman emperors. The changing associations of the torc can also be seen in a story recounted by Suetonius: the cognomen *Torquatus*, as well as a torc, was bestowed by Augustus upon one Nonius Asprenas when he fell from a horse and was injured during a Trojan games festival, presumably as compensation for

47 V.A. Maxfield, *The Military Decorations of the Roman Army* (London, 1981) 86-8, J. Linderski, 'Silver and gold of valor: the award of *armillae* and *torques*' *Latomus* 60 (2001) 3-15, I. Östenberg, *Staging the World: Spoils, Captives, and Representations in the Roman Triumphal Procession* (Oxford, 2009) 108-11.

48 I. Östenberg, *op.cit.* 109

the loss of his future military career.<sup>49</sup> It was the torc as a Roman military honour that British kings would have witnessed as hostages in Augustan Rome.

Torcs, as well as armbands or *armilla*, were evidently highly valued by their recipients as symbols of status and achievement. Funerary epitaphs mention these honours, and portraits display the deceased with the awarded torcs pinned to their cuirass (Fig. 9).<sup>50</sup> Although it is commonly believed that Roman soldiers only wore torcs pinned to their clothes, more recently it has been suggested that they may also have worn their torcs around their necks. In this case the famous Boscoreale cup, showing a man wearing a torc walking behind Tiberius' triumphal chariot, may be a Roman soldier who had been awarded the *dona militaria* and displayed this honour accordingly.<sup>51</sup> That the image of the torc became associated with Roman victory can also be seen on an orichalcum token. The token is evidently connected to a triumph: one side displays the *dona militaria*, while the other bears a laurel branch and the phrase "io io triumph(he)", the phrase shouted by spectators and soldiers during the procession (Fig. 10).<sup>52</sup> The high quality of the engraving and the use of orichalcum as a material suggest that this may have been a token issued by an emperor. While finds from Germany, France and Britain indicate that the torc could be both a male and female object in these areas, in the Roman world it became solely connected to the hyper-masculine world of the military. The decision then to portray Victory holding a torc on the coinage of a British king who knew Roman iconography may have been an acknowledgement of the Roman associations of the torc, or, by placing a



Figure 9: Tombstone of M. Caelius, a centurion of the XVIII legion, who died in the Varian disaster in AD 9. Caelius is shown between his two freedmen, wearing a *corona civica*, his cuirass decorated with a set of *phalerae* and two torcs, he also wears *armilla* on each wrist. (Now in the LVR-Landesmuseum Museum, Bonn, U82, CIL XIII 8648). (Jürgen Vogel. LVR - LandesMuseum Bonn. (Inv.-Nr. U 82)

49 Suet. *Aug.* 43.2. One wonders whether the decline of the Manlii Torquati as a family may also have influenced Augustus' decision here.

50 CIL III 3158, CIL XII 2230

51 I. Östenberg, *op.cit.* 110, B. Woytek, 'IO IO TRIVMP und A.P.P.F. Zu zwei Typen römischer Buntmetall-Tesserae' In *Festschrift für Wolfgang Hahn zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. W. Szaivert et al. (Wien, 2015) 480

52 B. Woytek, *op.cit.* 481



‘male’ attribute in the hands of a female goddess, the image may have been intended as a deliberate statement of dislocation or disjunction from the Roman language of images.<sup>53</sup>



Figure 10: Orichalcum Roman token, late first-second century AD (?). Two *armilla* within a torc, dotted border / Laurel branch, IO IO TRIVMP. Dotted border. (Reproduced courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group Inc., Electronic Auction 120 lot 113, [www.cngcoins.com](http://www.cngcoins.com))

Thus the torc, as an image and as an object, came to possess multiple meanings in the Roman world: initially associated with the Celts or Gauls, it became a symbol of the Manlii Torquati, and then a military honour associated with victory and Roman triumph. As coins (or tokens or other objects bearing torc imagery) moved from user to user in the Roman world and circulated over time, one or several of these associations would have been evoked. No one message was communicated, rather, to return to the quote given at the beginning of this article, meaning was ‘read into’ the image. Coins operated, in a sense, as miniature monuments *in motion*, meaning that their viewing context could not be controlled to the same extent as larger, static monuments (e.g. triumphal arches in Rome).<sup>54</sup> Given this, the analysis of coins and their imagery invites an iconological approach.

One coin of Decimus Silanus, showing Salus within a torc on the obverse, was found in Surrey in Britain, forming part of what was probably a votive hoard (Fig. 11). The remainder of the deposit contained two Iron Age Celtic coins, and coins of the Roman Empire (Otho to Diva Faustina), as well as four miniature brooches, a fragment of a miniature axe and a spindle whorl. The wear on the coin, along with the accompanying finds, suggests it had been in circulation for quite some time before deposition. By the second century AD in Britain, the connection of the torc to military victory and the *dona militaria* was arguably more apparent than the connection with the Manlii Torquati (who died out under Nero). The meaning(s) read into the image then, were likely different to the original intention of the moneyer, as the coin moved geographically and

<sup>53</sup> See M. Aldhouse-Green, *op.cit.* 58, 78-81

<sup>54</sup> On the ‘inherently unstable’ viewing context of numismatic imagery see W. Mwangi, ‘The lion, the native and the coffee plant: political imagery and the ambiguous art of currency design in colonial Kenya’ *Geopolitics* 7 (2002) 35.

temporally. Similarly, one imagines that the Celtic coinage that was still in circulation in this period must have acquired additional meanings for the users.



Figure 11: AR denarius, mint of Rome, 91 BC, D. Silanus moneyer, 3.3g. Obverse: Head of Salus right, SALVS below. Torc as border. Reverse: Victory in biga right, holding palm-branch and reins in left hand and whip in right hand. D. SILANVS F. in exergue. Border of dots. (RRC 337/2f, Reproduced courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme: Williams, D (2011) *SUR-346844: A ROMAN COIN* Web page available at: <https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/422612> [Accessed: Oct 9, 2015 5:20:41 PM]).

### Conclusion: the social lives of images

This study has traced the movement of the image of Victory from the Mediterranean to Britain (where it gained additional meaning connected to trade and commerce) as well as the journey of the torc to Rome (where it gained additional associations with a particular Roman *gens* and military valour). In both journeys, the original association(s) of the images were never lost (the image of Victory in pre-Roman Britain would have recalled Rome and Roman power, and the torc maintained a Gallic reference within Roman culture), but additional meanings were created as the adopted image became a medium for the formation of new identities and culture. Mitchell demonstrates that images have an active role in the formation of culture, not only reflecting particular values, but also creating new forms of value, even at an unconscious level within the viewer.<sup>55</sup> In Britain, the classical Victory was a new way for British kings to display status and power at a time in which Rome (and her material culture) was becoming increasingly dominant, and provided a new language for the expression of commercial success. In Rome, the torc became the focus of a legendary mythology for one particular Roman family, affording them identity and status within the ancestry-focused culture of aristocratic Rome, before becoming a symbol through which Roman soldiers might publicly display their military skill and status at the end of the Republic and the Empire.

<sup>55</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell *op.cit.* 105. On the power of ‘unconscious’ viewing see also L. Yarrow, ‘Heracles, coinage and the West: three Hellenistic case-studies’ in *The Hellenistic West: Rethinking the Ancient Mediterranean*, J. Prag & J. Quinn (eds) (Oxford, 2013) 348-66.



Why and how did some images acquire ‘legs’, and others not? British rulers had the entire Roman ‘language of images’ at their disposal, but clearly were selective regarding the imagery they utilised. This choice appears to have been based upon the Briton’s own concept of divinity. The hybrid deities of the Mediterranean were favoured, while the majority of the anthropomorphic pantheon do not seem to have drawn British interest to the same extent. Victory was chosen as an image to adopt, but did not lose her classical role completely. The British acknowledged that she was a symbol of success, but Victory was adapted to conform to their own culture. Rather than being a symbol of conquest, Victory communicated economic success, and while in some cases she did not lose her martial aspect, this was often downplayed in favour of her new, British, role.

The torc, meanwhile, was a powerful status symbol within barbarian society, and thus was an appropriate image to ‘conquer’, becoming, in turn, a status symbol of the Torquati. But as the Torquati declined, and the Roman government became a principate, the use of the torc on coinage disappeared. The growing connection of the torc imagery to the *dona militaria*, in conjunction with the fact that the coinage of Rome came to increasingly focus on contemporary individuals (and eventually the emperor), may provide part of the reason. As Rome became an Empire, and then a principate, the complex competing ideologies of Roman aristocrats disappeared from currency; these complex familial types would not have been understood outside of the Roman elite, consequently they were unsuitable for a currency that circulated throughout a Mediterranean Empire. Not all Republican imagery was transferred into the repertoire of Imperial state art; Hölscher observes that those images that did not become part of the public image of the emperor were used by other classes—senators, equestrians and others.<sup>56</sup> This is what occurred with the torc, and its social life as an image or object (and subsequent appearances and use) can thus be connected to broader political and cultural shifts in this period.

While images may have been selected with a particular intent, the coins they graced did not just ‘communicate’ messages, but interacted with their users to form new, multiple, and even conflicting meanings. There is little textual evidence for pre-Roman Britain, but the surviving literature of the Roman world reveals that meanings were indeed ‘read into’ numismatic iconography. Suetonius, for example, mistakenly believed that Nero struck a coin of himself playing the lyre.<sup>57</sup> Eusebius believed that Constantine’s numismatic portrait showed the emperor with his eyes uplifted in prayer, although this type of portrait was probably meant to connect Constantine to Alexander the

56 T. Hölscher, ‘Historical representations of the Roman Republic: The repertoire of coinage in comparison with other art media’ in *Art in the Round. New Approaches to Ancient Coin Iconography*, (eds) N. Elkins & S. Krmnicek (Tübingen, 2014) 32

57 Suet. *Ner.* 25.4

Great, not to God.<sup>58</sup> Ovid writes that the imagery of a Roman Republican As (with Janus on the obverse and a ship on the reverse) commemorated the arrival of Saturn in Italy, a meaning given to an image well after the coin was struck.<sup>59</sup> On-going modern debates about the meaning of particular coin imagery (e.g. Caesar's famous 'elephant denarius', RRC 443/1) also reveal the multiple ways an image might be interpreted.<sup>60</sup> By incorporating these realisations into the study of numismatic iconography we will gain a better understanding of the full variety of roles and meanings these images had within antiquity, and how imagery and objects functioned within ancient societies more broadly.

## Abbreviations

ABC: C. Rudd, *Ancient British Coinage* (Norwich, 2010)

RIC 1<sup>2</sup>: C.H.V. Sutherland & R.A.G. Carson, *The Roman Imperial Coinage. Vol 1: From 31 BC to AD 69.* (London, 1984)

PAS: Portable Antiquities Scheme, <https://finds.org.uk/>

RRC: M.H. Crawford, *Roman Republican Coinage (2 vols)*, (Cambridge, 1974)

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58 Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 4.15, with discussion of both passages in S. Krmnicek & N.T. Elkins, 'Dinosaurs, cocks, and coins: an introduction to 'Art in the Round'' in *'Art in the Round': New Approaches to Ancient Coin Iconography*, (eds) N. Elkins & S. Krmnicek (Tübingen, 2014) 7-8

59 *Ov. Fast.* 1.229ff, see also *Macrob. Sat.* 1.22

60 For an overview of the various theories see B. Woytek, *Arma et nummi. Forschungen zur römischen Finanzgeschichte und Münzprägung der Jahre 49 bis 42 v.Chr.* (Wien, 2003) 119-23, and then B. Woytek, 'Iulius Caesars Finanzen und Münzprägung im Jahre 49 v.Chr.: Bemerkungen zu RRC 433/1' in *XIII Congreso Internacional de numismática, Madrid, 2003, Actas* (Madrid, 2005) 643-4, D.L. Nousesk (2008) 'Turning points in Roman history: the case of Caesar's elephant denarius' *Phoenix* 62 (2008) 290-307, D. Woods (2009) 'Caesar the elephant against Juba the snake', *Numismatic Chronicle* 169 (2009) 189-92.