The Disappearance of Isis on Imperial Coinage

This paper argues that coinage depicting the image of the goddess Isis did not appear on Roman coinage from 58 BCE until nearly a century after the reign of Augustus due to her association with Cleopatra, Antony, and Caesarion. In the Augustan era, Cleopatra aligned herself with the imagery of Isis in her dress, coinage, and art in Egypt and its provinces. The connection between Cleopatra and Isis was still fresh in the mind of Augustus when he began to mint Imperial coinage. Isis should be present on the coins due to the popularity of her cult, and my research identifies a glaring gap where her image should have appeared.

The cult of Isis at Rome was thriving for decades when Augustus became emperor though her image drops out of the catalogue through the Julio-Claudian era. From the inception of Augustan rule in 31 BCE, all major foreign cult figures could be found on Augustan coins, which makes the absence of Isis remarkable. Foreign cult figures such as Serapis, who was closely linked to Isis, did indeed appear on Imperial coinage. Isis fell out of the Roman numismatic catalogue until the second century CE when her image was resurrected along with the reinstatement of pagan imagery by emperors such as Hadrian and Antoninus Pius.

My research includes an extensive search of the Roman Republic Coinage database as well as Coin Archives Pro, with an examination of hundreds of coins from the Republican and Imperial era. Although the lack of coins of Isis has not formerly been treated, the scholarship of Eric Orhlin, Sarolta Takacs, and Susan Heyob, among others, analyzes the significance of the cult of Isis in the Imperial period, which makes her extraction from the numismatic collection even more significant.


