

TAIS PAGOTO BÉLO



THE STRENGTH OF  
**ROMAN  
WOMEN**

through coins and a  
feminist critique from  
the past to the present



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## Preface 2

### The study of Roman empresses under a gender perspective

The study of Roman empresses on coins is a fascinating field of numismatics and historical research. Seemingly embryonic, the first studies on Roman empresses on coins can be traced back to the first numismatic and historical works that focused on the representations of empresses on coins from the Roman Empire. Although numismatics has a long history as a discipline, the specific study of representations of empresses and reflections on gender have yet to be further developed. The present work *The strength of Roman women through coins and a feminist critique from the past to the present*, written by Tais Pagoto Bélo, offers a relevant contribution to both fields: the presence and agency of Roman empresses in Roman society as a whole, and the resulting gender reflections.

Historically, academic production included the cataloguing of Roman coins, which at first was no more than a simple referencing of the coins (the fact that women were included in these catalogues had nothing to do with their choice of iconography, they were included because their effigies, busts and legends were on the coveted coins). In this regard, we highlight Joseph Hilarius Eckhel (1737-1798), an Austrian Jesuit scholar and numismatist. Eckhel is often considered one of the pioneers in the study of Roman coins and their historical context. In his monumental work *Doctrina Numorum Veterum* (published at the end of the 18th century), Eckhel extensively catalogued and described Roman coins, including those with empresses. His work laid the foundations for the systematic study of numismatics.

The 19th century saw the flourishing of several numismatic studies of relevance to the subject, among them the work *Description historique des monnaies frappées sous l'Empire romain communément appelées, médailles impériales*, written by Henry Cohen in 1859. At this time, the cataloguing of pieces with Fulvia, Octavia, Livia, Agrippina Major and Agrippina Minor followed the protocol of being there simply because they were of interest to the collection.

Moving into the 20th century, we find important reference works for collectors and scholars of Roman coins. Over the years, various numismatists, historians and archaeologists have continued to study and write about Roman empresses on coins. However, research in this field was still in its infancy,

and even with scholars using advanced techniques and resources to gain a deeper understanding of the role of empresses in the Roman Empire, such study remained somewhat neglected until the work of Tais Pagoto Bélo.

From the 1920s, we would highlight *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, written by Harold Mattingly and Edward Allen Sydenham (1926). This is a classic work on Roman coins and includes valuable information on the representation of Roman empresses on coins.

The post-World War II period saw the publication of *Roman Coins and Their Values* (1964) by David R. Sear. This work endeavoured, albeit timidly, to include information about Roman empresses on coins, their titles and the historical context in which they were minted.

The book *Roman Silver Coins: The Republic to Augustus*, written by Herbert Allen Seaby in 1987, covers a wide variety of Roman coins, including those with empresses, and provides us with valuable context.

A few years later, the book *Handbook of Roman Imperial Coins: A Complete Guide to the History, Types, Symbols and Artistry of Roman Imperial Coinage*, written by David Can Meter in 1991, proved to be a practical guide for collectors and researchers interested in Roman imperial coins, including those with empresses.

In 1999, Martin Goodman wrote *The Roman World 44BC-AD 180*. This work traces the impact of imperial politics on the life of the city of Rome itself and on the rest of the empire, arguing that despite long periods of apparent peace, this was a society controlled as much by fear of state violence as by consent. Although it doesn't focus on coins, this book provides an overview of the history of the Roman Empire and the role of the empresses.

First published in 2001, *Coinage and History of the Roman Empire* by David L. Vagi is an invaluable study in the field of Roman history. Vagi is an invaluable study in the fields of Roman history and numismatics. This book provides relevant insights into the historical and political context of Roman coinage, including the role of empresses.

William E. Metcalf released *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Coinage* in 2012. Although the author focuses on Greek and Roman coinage more broadly, it contains sections on imperial women and their representation on coins.

All these works that have been written over the last few decades, in one way or another, provide information about the Roman empresses, but only in a tangential and terse way.



As for the study of the gender perspective in ancient coins, it is important to consider that this is still a very narrow but fascinating field of numismatics. Although the main focus of ancient coins is often on their historical and economic aspects, scholars have also examined how these small objects reflect and sometimes mould gender roles, identities and representations in the societies that produced them. Therefore, we can assure you that "The Strength of Roman Women" is the great ace up its sleeves in the development of the field.

Some themes have emerged on this horizon, such as studies on the portraits of female rulers on coins. These reflect gender perspectives through the representation and strength of female rulers, such as Cleopatra in Egypt or Julia Domna in Rome. Studies on iconography and symbolism: the symbols and motifs on coins can often have gender-specific meanings, and this, among many other things, is what Pagoto Bélo seeks to show throughout her work. Studies on the imperial family and forms of dynastic politics can also be highlighted. In this case, the coins of Ancient Rome show how the roles and attributes of empresses and other female members of the family can be studied through their numismatic representations. Studies of women in economic contexts have also been the focus of concern for scholars over time. Women's agency in economic activities, such as trade or financial management, political influence, their actions as philanthropists and sponsors, their role in patronage and clientelism relationships have acquired proportions that are only now, thanks to the concerns of gender studies, beginning to be better observed.

Although there is ongoing research in this field, specific studies may vary depending on the region and period of interest. Numismatists, archaeologists and historians often collaborate to analyse and interpret the gender perspective on ancient coins, contributing to our understanding of how gender roles and representations have evolved throughout history.

Tais Bélo contributes to the debate by analysing the public image of Roman imperial women through coins during the Julio-Claudian family. Starting with an iconographic analysis of the coins, she sought to highlight issues linked to Roman patronage, as well as issues linked to the imperial cult, always taking as her starting point the political and daily life of the women of the imperial family.

The author also discusses the spheres of private and domestic life of Roman women in the context of the *patria potestas*, which were significant and marked the power relations within the Roman family. Her research

highlights the achievements of Roman imperial women who, among many feats, had their memory preserved by having their names remembered on statues, plaques and coins.

Tais Pagoto Bélo's research at the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of the University of São Paulo (MAE-USP), as well as at the Coin and Medal Cabinet of the Royal National Library (KBR) and the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), has sharpened her knowledge and enabled her to produce this absolutely relevant work on the agency of Roman empresses in ancient Roman society, and on the role of gender studies in Antiquity. The coin, in her work, is the vehicle with which we can access "the strength of Roman women"; as well as inviting us to reflect on the role of these women in the past and present.

**Vagner Carvalho Porto**

*Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology*

*University of São Paulo*