

**Review of: S. Krmnicek, Münze und Geld im
frühhömischen Ostalpenraum : Studien zum Münzumlau
f und zur Funktion von Münzgeld anhand der Funde und
Befunde vom Magdalensberg, Klagenfurt, 2010**

Stéphane Martin

► **To cite this version:**

Stéphane Martin. Review of: S. Krmnicek, Münze und Geld im frühhömischen Ostalpenraum : Studien zum Münzumlau f und zur Funktion von Münzgeld anhand der Funde und Befunde vom Magdalensberg, Klagenfurt, 2010. The Journal of Archaeological Numismatics, European Centre for Numismatic Studies, Brussels, 2011, 1, pp.246-251. hal-01466617

HAL Id: hal-01466617

<https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01466617>

Submitted on 13 Feb 2017

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



S. KRMNICEK, *Münze und Geld im frühromischen Ostalpenraum : Studien zum Münzumschlag und zur Funktion von Münzgeld anhand der Funde und Befunde vom Magdalensberg*. Kärntner Museumsschriften 80 = Archäologische Forschungen zu den Grabungen auf dem Magdalensberg 17. Klagenfurt, Verlag des Landesmuseums Kärnten, 2010. 466 p. + 1 CD-ROM. ISBN 978-3-900575-47-2. € 29,90.

A LITTLE LESS THAN 30 YEARS after a first monograph, published in the FMRÖ series (FMRÖ II/1), S. Krmnecik has produced both a new catalogue and a thorough study of the coins from the Magdalensberg in *Noricum*, today Austria. This book is a slightly revised version of a PhD dissertation defended in 2009 at the Goethe-Universität (Frankfurt am Main). The author is to be praised, not only for the quick publication of his work, but also for its quality, and I do believe it represents an important step in the publication of coin finds. In this review I will concentrate on the methodological aspects – not that the results are of little importance, but these are the products of a renewed approach, which must be discussed at length.

The book unfolds in a traditional manner : historiography and methodology (p. 13-34), presentation of the coin finds (p. 34-143), presentation of the results of the finds analysis (p. 149-171), literature (p. 172-208) and catalogue of the 1.434 coins (p. 209-461). No plates, except for the rare countermarks (p. 465-466), but the photographs of 1,411 coins are given in col-

our and in a pdf file, on a CD-ROM attached to the book.

The Magdalensberg is quite an exceptional site. The occupation spans a little less than a century, from the mid 1st c. BC to the mid 1st c. AD, until the *municipium* of *Virunum* was built. The settlement on the Magdalensberg was a trading centre for Roman merchants, less than 150 km from the colony of Aquileia. Although known for quite a long time, it has mainly been excavated from 1949 on. These excavations were conducted from the beginning using stratigraphical principles, and reports published regularly, both on the structures (the reports then include a survey of the finds) and the finds (in the form of monographs concerning one class of finds; this book is part of this series). As a consequence, this site offers a wealth of above standard data almost unique in the Roman world, and far better, both in quantity and quality, than what is at present available south of the Alps, including northern Italy.

This has allowed Krmnicek to bring in a major innovation in a numismatic monograph: the analysis is focused mainly on the archaeological contexts. Of course, including contexts in the course of the analysis is nothing new. It is a tendency that grew out of the refinement of archaeological practice, making archaeological contexts more and more reliable, particularly chronologically. Establishing a better chronology of the series under study, either when they were minted (e.g. Haselgrove 1999) or when they were used (e.g. Peter 2001, p. 42-43), has been, so far, the main use of archaeological contexts in numismatics. But to my knowledge, no one has attempted to use systematically the nature of the archaeological feature to study *how* coins were used (Haselgrove 2005 is an attempt, but does not use exclusively stratified finds, and consequently only takes into account the nature of the site, not of the archaeological feature). Krmnicek tries to tackle the problem both theoretically (p. 25-30) and practically (p. 83-148).

He starts by challenging the way we conceptualize archaeological finds, and how we apply these concepts to coins. This is in line with a previous article that sought to apply the concept of object biography^[1] to coins (Krmnicek 2009), in order to move away from a strictly economic interpretation of coins, and to reinject social meaning in coin use. He sets aside the categories of hoards, single finds, settlement finds, funerary finds, as potentially misleading and

theoretically unclear. In order to interpret finds on a sound basis, he tries to define which criterion is necessary to allow or not a correct interpretation of coin finds, and concludes that we can only rely on the archaeological context of the finds, which is defined as follows: "(...) *repräsentiert ein Befund alles, was in einer archäologischen Fundsituation zu Erkenntnissen über die einstige Wirklichkeit führen kann. Darunter sind alle archäologisch sowie numismatisch relevanten Beobachtungen am und im Fundkontext sowie der Fundkontext selbst zu verstehen.*" (p. 26). Therefore, Krmnicek divides the finds in two categories, A and B: "In find category A, all coin finds are included for which – in contrast to find category B – the archaeological feature cannot provide any clues as to the character of the finds as archaeological sources. Find category B includes all coins for which – in contrast to find category A – the archaeological feature can provide information about the character of the source. In this way, the peculiarity of the location, which for its part is highlighted by the unique character of the finds, as well as any regular relationship between location and thing, characterise the interpretation as find category B." (p. 165). Of course, as archaeologists, we can only apprehend the last depositional context, which might not be, as Krmnicek underlines, the last intended context.

This is a major advance in the field of numismatic theory. It was made possible by the nature of the Magdalensberg excavations, but this does not mean it cannot be put in practice elsewhere. Moreover, it has to be! On one point, however, Krmnicek might have been too much influenced by the extraordinary quality of the information on the site. I think his categories are a bit strict, and a division in four rather than two find categories could have been more fruitful. For find category A includes both old or recent finds for which the context is unclear or unknown (e.g. cat. 0004, 1153, 1154) and coins for which the nature of the structure is unclear, known but poorly recorded according to Krmnicek's standards (e.g. cat. 0090 and 1162), but which have nevertheless a precise chronological framework (numerous examples, studied in chap. 7, p. 83-115). Can we really say that this last category does not give any information about how coins were used? About their biography? Coins without archaeological contextual information of any kind (neither structural nor chronological) match plainly the definition of find category A; the only information they might give is where they were found. But coins with a well-defined chronological context, *i.e.* coins for which we know when they were de-

[1] First defined by I. Kopytoff (1986), the concept has been the subject of the vol. 31.2 of *World Archaeology* (1999).

posited, although we do not have the information to interpret the nature of the deposition, give much more information. Of course, Krmnicek does not ignore this information, discussed at length in chap. 7, and compared to the category B finds. On the other hand, some of his category B finds cannot be assigned to a precise chronological period (p. 138-139), which in my view lowers considerably the interest of the information (for the only dating criterion is numismatic, and the risk of circular reasoning is high).

The problem is not how he uses the information from his find categories, but how he conceptualizes it, and above all, how this conceptualization can be used on other sites. I think in his stressing the nature of the archaeological feature, Krmnicek does not attach enough importance to the precise dating of the feature. This should be a criterion in the conceptualization of the find categories, and I therefore propose to complete Krmnicek's find categories in the way summed up in the following table (fig. 1).

	A : feature doesn't allow further interpretation	B : feature allows further interpretation
1 : chronology unknown or unclear	--	-
2 : precise chronology	+	++

Fig. 1 – A proposal of conceptualisation of find categories applied to coins

In columns are the find categories according to Krmnicek. In rows, I added the chronological criterion : is the feature precisely dated (row 2) or not (row 1). The table shows the hierarchy between the different categories : category B2 is the more fruitful, followed in my sense by category A2, not B1. Of course, category A1 gives very few information (at best, where was the coin found). This hierarchy is acknowledged in the study of the Magdalensberg (p. 83-84), but must, in my view, be clear and explicit from the start. For few sites (or perhaps, to be more accurate, few publications) offer as much contextual information as the Magdalensberg. From personal experience, I have noticed it is frequent, particularly in "old" publications from the second half of the 20th c., to find category A2 information: for instance, general synthesis of the site, with finds given by chronological phases, but without precise contextual information (nature of the feature, location on site, nature of the find assemblage). Krmnicek faced the same situation (p. 84).

To sum up these criticisms against Krmnicek's conceptualization, I would say that his approach is too anthropological, and not archaeological enough. This may seem paradoxical, as his approach is based exclusively on the archaeological feature: by too anthropological, I mean he does not put enough emphasis on the chronological aspect, which I find essential. Even without precise information on the feature where it was recovered, a coin in a chronologically well-defined deposit can give crucial archaeological information, and in the end be useful to approach the society which produced and used it from a more anthropological point of view.

Another point of debate is which type of feature goes into category A, and which in category B? Krmnicek pleads for a careful examination of the type of structure, the location of the coins in the structure and the accompanying finds (p. 29). In effect, he retains more or less the classical distinction between primary and secondary deposits, as is apparent from the comparison of tab. 58 (p. 116) and 62 (p. 141). Into category A go rubble, levelling layers, and even *in situ* layers. In category B go pits, wells, floors, foundation trenches, damp environments. In my view, this impairs the neutrality of the analysis advocated by Krmnicek, because it introduces a selective factor before the analysis stage.

First of all, even if it cannot be denied that rubble normally contains secondary deposited material, for instance ceramics, this does not mean that everything in the rubble is secondary deposits. Although there is without doubt some uncertainty about the nature of the deposit, the fact that rubble or similar layers cannot give information about how coins were used is still an hypothesis and has to be demonstrated. Likewise, finds coming from pits or wells could all the same be secondary deposits. Of course, this could be detected by careful examination of all the contextual information available, and that's how Krmnicek proceeded for the Magdalensberg. But again, not all sites offer the same precision in their reports (when the reports were written), and if we want to export Krmnicek's methods to other sites, we have to take this into account. And as I have written above, we have to go this way if we want to gain better understanding of coin finds.

I only propose to refine Krmnicek's concepts, certainly not to modify the "philosophy" behind it. The way he applies his theories and methods to the Magdalensberg is, as far as I'm aware, unparalleled. He starts with a general presentation of the coins, comparing the finds

published in FMRÖ II/1 and posterior finds up to 2006 (both offer the same profile). A presentation by sector follows; it appears a bit short, but it must be kept in mind that this volume is part of the *Archäologische Forschungen zu den Grabungen auf dem Magdalensberg*, a collection of monographs on specific classes of finds articulated with the *Magdalensberg-Grabungsbericht* collection in which one can find all the information on the archaeological features, and a number of plans and sections. Nevertheless, a few more plans would have been useful (how many readers will go back to the excavation reports?). Then comes the traditional global commentary of the coins (which is sometimes called the “antiquarian” part of the study in German literature; Krmnicek calls his chap. 6 the *konventionelle numismatische Auswertung der Fundmünzen*). One can find a useful and up to date summary for the study of Norican coinage (p. 40-43) in this chapter.

What about the “unconventional” part of his study, that is, the part based on his new concepts of find category A and B? I would address to it the same criticisms as to the theoretical part. The chronological aspect should be present at every step. Krmnicek starts by converting the different denominations, both Celtic and Roman, into their value in *sestertii*. The distinction between the two find categories shows both that precious coins, and heavier coins, are found in category B finds (p. 68-69); but is it the same for each of the six periods of occupation? One might say that the statistical value of the sample will be reduced; but what value can you give to statistics taking into account deposits from different periods, when we are able to distinguish them? When, for each find category, coins are studied according to the archaeological structure where they were found (p. 115-117 for category A, p. 139-143 for category B), is there an evolution from the late Republican to the Claudian period? Some graphs would have shown this clearly – again, more illustrations would have been helpful. Let us illustrate with one example: the comparison between the two find categories are minimal (mainly, a comparison of table 42 and table 65 in less than ten lines, p. 143). Krmnicek just mentions that Celtic coins are much more numerous in Augustan category B finds than in the contemporaneous category A finds, and then goes on to reflect on the function of coinage as illustrated by category B finds (p. 143-148).

Two graphs make this very clear (fig. 2 and 3):

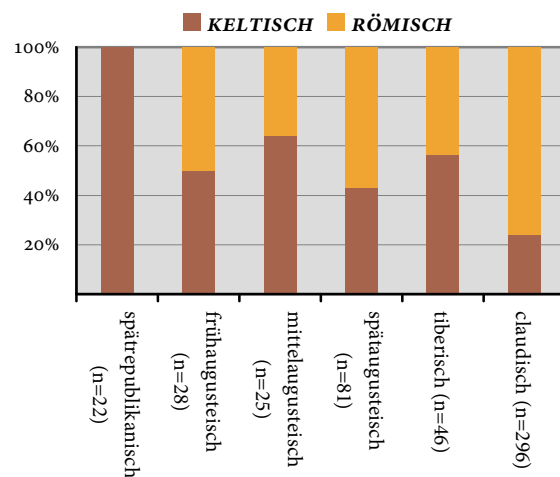


Fig. 2 – Category A finds by chronological phases (compiled from tab. 36-41, p. 91-94)

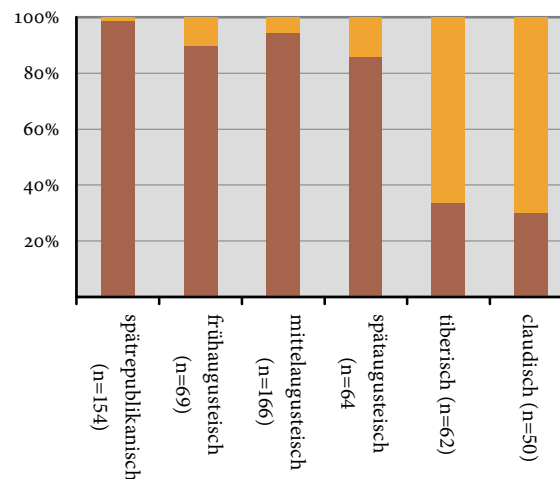


Fig. 3 – Category B finds by chronological phases (compiled from chap. 8.2, p. 125-139)

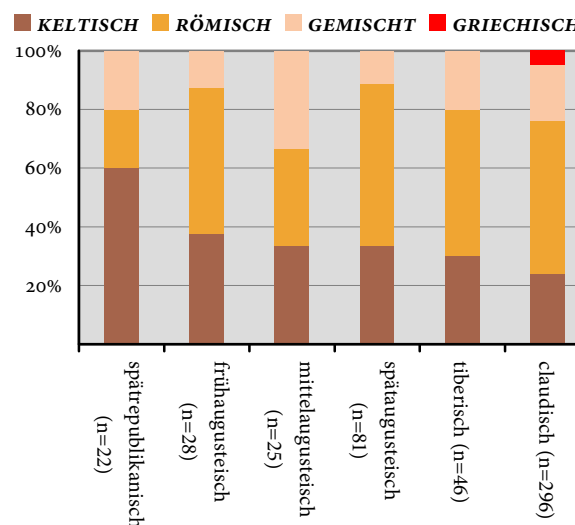


Fig. 4 – Composition of category B finds by chronological phases (compiled from chap. 8.2, p. 125-139)

But if one goes further, and examines the composition of the category B finds, to see which type of coins are present (Celtic, Roman or both), it is very clear that from the early Augustan period onwards, there are less and less finds composed solely of Celtic coins, and a growing number of mixed and Roman only finds (fig. 4). This counterbalances seriously the high number of Celtic coins in category B deposits up to the Tiberian time.

Another important point in Krmnicek's treatment of the finds from the Magdalensberg is to broaden the scope, looking at written evidence (and he has the chance of having archaeological written evidence on his site), and integrating more anthropological approaches, in line with his work on object biographies (p. 143-148, p. 151-155). This part follows the presentation of the archaeological context, and partly derives from it. But I find the link too loose – not in theory, but in practice. I agree with Krmnicek: the way to gain a better insight in coin use (be it economic or not) is to explore the archaeological context of the finds, and try to interpret the evidence from a more global point of view. But we have to go deeper in the exploitation of the archaeological features, always combining both the chronological, the geographical, and the "functional" aspects, all three together and not one after another.

To sum up, this publication is a major work. It offers a unique collection of site finds south of the Alps, that will be precious to scholars both south and north of the Alps. Moreover, these finds are stratified, which makes the site and the publication all the more important. Krmnicek develops a new treatment of coin finds, and that is to me the most important aspect. Although this review is full of criticisms, it is only in the hope they will contribute to the improvement of Krmnicek's theories and methods. It might not be the only method possible, but we must go this way. Numismatics has its own characteristics as a discipline, but a vast number of coins are found as archaeological artefacts, and must be treated as such. Most of the time, the archaeologist and the numismatist are two different persons; such is the case at the Magdalensberg, but this publication is the living proof that a fruitful collaboration is possible, and can give tremendous results.

To conclude, it must be stressed that approaching coins in an archaeological manner does not make more traditional approaches obsolete, nor is it contradictory. For instance, stratified finds can be a very good material to deal with the problem of wear. I have tracked in the catalogue Augustan Moneyers' asses with indication of their mass and with a more or less pre-

cisely known deposition time frame (see the histogram in fig. 5).

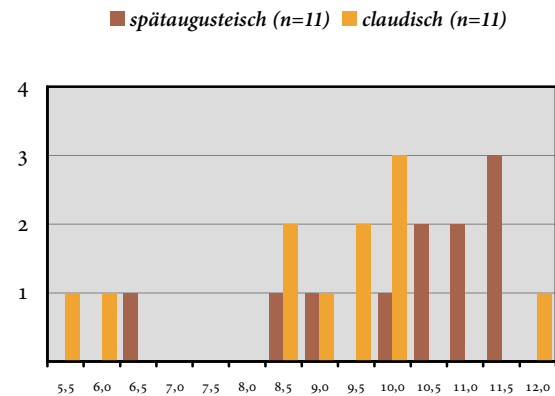


Fig. 5 – Histogram of the masses of Moneyers' asses, according to their time of deposit

Two main groups can be identified: 11 coins deposited during the late Augustan period (1-15 AD) and 11 during the Claudian period (30-50 AD). Their respective mean and median masses are plotted in fig. 6: coins deposited during the late Augustan period have a mean mass of 9,87 with a median at 10,16 g; for the Claudian period, the mean is 8,75 with a median at 9,16 g. The mean and median at the gates of the mint (i.e. of 'freshly coined' specimens) can be inferred with fair confidence from 241 Moneyers' asses kept in the public coin cabinets of Glasgow, London and Paris: this sample yields a mean of 10,60 g and a median of 10,66 g (data provided by J.-M. Doyen; see the category 'freshly coined' in fig. 6).

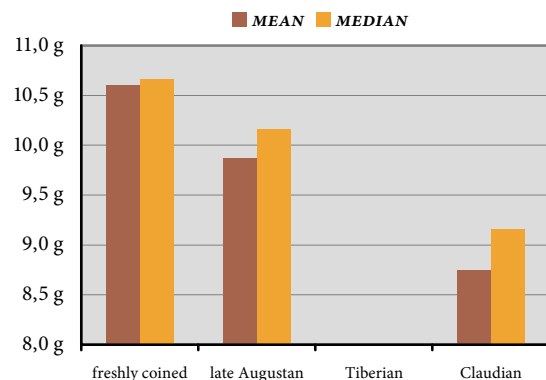


Fig. 6 – Mean and median mass of Moneyers' asses found on the Magdalensberg deposited during the Augustan and Claudian periods, as compared to 'freshly coined' specimens

This implies that on this particular site, after 10 to 20 years of use, the asses had lost nearly 7% of their mass, and after 40 to 50 years, 17,5%. A mean value of annual wear can thus be estimated at 0,3 to 0,5%. It would be interesting to

multiply similar studies on different sites, for different series, and integrate such stratigraphical data in wear studies (such as Delamare 1995, for instance).

Archaeology is not a threat to traditional numismatics, it is an opportunity not to be missed!

REFERENCES

Appadurai (ed.) 1986

A. APPADURAI (ed.), *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge, 1986.

Delamare 1994

F. DELAMARE, *Le frai et ses lois, ou De l'évolution des espèces*. Cahiers Ernest-Babelon 5, Paris, 1995.

FMRÖ II/1

H. BANNERT & G. PICCOTTINI, *Die Fundmünzen der römischen Zeit in Österreich. FMRÖ III/1. Die Fundmünzen vom Magdalensberg*. Kärntner Museumschriften 52 = Archäologische Forschungen zu den Grabungen auf dem Magdalensberg 2, Klagenfurt, 1972.

Haselgrove 1999

C. HASELGROVE, The development of Iron Age coinage in Belgic Gaul. *NC* 159, 1999, p. 111-168.

Haselgrove 2005

C. HASELGROVE, A new approach to analysing the circulation of Iron Age coinage. *NC* 165, 2005, p. 129-174.

von Kaenel & Kemmers (eds.) 2009

H.-M. VON KAENEL & F. KEMMERS (eds.), *Coins in Context I. New perspectives for the interpretation of coin finds. Colloquium Frankfurt a. M., October 25-27, 2007*. Studien zu Fundmünzen der Antike 23, Mainz, 2009.

Kopytoff 1986

I. KOPYTOFF, The cultural biography of things : commoditization as process. In : Appadurai (ed.) 1986, p. 64-94.

Krmnicek 2009

S. KRMNICEK, Das Konzept der Objektbiographie in der antiken Numismatik. In : von Kaenel & Kemmers (eds.) 2009, p. 47-59.

Peter 2001

M. PETER, *Untersuchungen zu den Fundmünzen aus Augst und Kaiseraugst*. Studien zu Fundmünzen der Antike 17, Berlin, 2001.

Stéphane MARTIN

