Compared with other coveted antiquities such as marbles, vessels, and engraved gems or cameos, Greek and Roman coins were plentiful, inexpensive, and available wherever humanists could be found: “for every ancient statue that we have today,” wrote Girolamo Ruscelli in his preface to Sebastiano Erizzo’s *Discorso sopra le medaglie antiche*, “there are many, many medals throughout the world.” The Venetian humanist was addressing Sigismund II, king of Poland, whose territories contained no classical monuments except Greek and Roman coins brought there centuries ago by audacious merchants, and more recently by modern collectors returning from Italy and the Levant. Roman imperial money drifted far from the borders of the empire in return for amber, pearls, pepper, and silk; at the very edges of Renaissance Europe, in Scotland and Sweden and beyond the Danube, Greek and Roman coins were discovered daily as single specimens or buried hoards. In 1598 Stefan Zamosius published an account of the antiquities found in Transylvania, once part of the remote Roman province of Dacia; these included some inscriptions, arms, and statues, but by far the most abundant remains of the ancient Romans and their allies in this region were coins: “an innumerable variety of them,” writes Zamosius, of many emperors, especially Trajan and Hadrian. Even a coin of Cicero has turned up in Transylvanian soil, our scholar reports, which proves that the counterfeiters of the Renaissance, so active in Italy and France, did not neglect the remoter parts of Europe. A remarkable number of Greek coins as well are listed by Zamosius, including the silver of Philip of Macedon, Alexander the Great, Lysimachus, and many other kings and cities, “of which the names are scarcely found in books.” But his favorite among these small Transylvanian antiquities is a silver tetradrachma displaying the beautiful head of Semiramis, queen of Assyria, with a Greek inscription “in the most ancient and crude characters,” a piece which Zamosius describes in rhapsodic terms, and which deserves a place in the same cabinet as the denarius of Cicero.

At Rome, reported one humanist, ancient coins “gush forth from a perennial vein” perenni vena scaturiunt. The image recalls the flow of blood and reminds us that these objects were the most fluid of all antiquities, enjoying a vigorous circulation in Renaissance Europe. They frequently traveled from city to city in letters and passed from hand to hand as gifts and tokens of friendship—“a paltry pledge of my esteem for you,” in the words of one of Erasmus’s correspondents. This great scholar certainly did not keep all the coins he was given, but passed them on to other friends in turn, like Henry Glarean, professor at Paris, who received money of Trajan and Alexander the Great as a wedding present. The staters and drachmas of ancient Greece
especially traveled very far from their native cities and islands to come to rest in western cabinets and reliquaries; Isabella d’Este was delighted by the present of an ancient coin sent to her wrapped in a sonnet by Fra Sabba da Castiglione, who had picked up this piece, and composed these verses, while musing among the ruins of the Temple of Apollo at Delos. The number of silver didrachmas of Rhodes preserved as “Judas pennies” in churches throughout Italy and France indicate that this kind of traffic took place very early. One of the better-known anecdotes associated with this commerce tells how the great Roman antiquarian Fulvio Orsini complained of the high price demanded for a medal of Cicero, supposedly struck at Magnesia in Asia Minor when Cicero was proconsul there. The dealer replied that the price was in no way extravagant since it would scarcely cover the cost of passage from Magnesia to Rome. Perhaps this same medal continued its wanderings to find its way to Zamosius in Transylvania—we can only hope he was not required to pay the entire cost of the passage!

Beginning in 1517, with the publication of Andrea Fulvio’s Illustrium imagines, the coins themselves were joined by another kind of object that could be collected, circulated, exchanged, and given away, and which seemed to gush forth from its own perennial vein—the numismatic book (fig. 1). Indeed, the profile portraits on the ancient coins, and the low-relief scenes and figures they carried on their reverse sides, seem well suited for reproduction in black and white as woodcuts and copperplate engravings. The fact that they carried inscriptions made them even more compatible with the text of the printed page. Their round shape was no obstacle to aesthetic harmony with lines of print, for they could be surrounded by a great assortment of frames (fig. 2), or placed within the text like the decorative vignettes and historiated initials of the old manuscripts (fig. 3). If Renaissance publishers such as Mazzocchi of Rome, Rouille of Lyons, or Plantin of Antwerp had taken the time to stop and reflect philosophically on their activity, they would have observed that ancient coins were especially suitable for replication by the press, since these were already mass-produced identical objects, the prototype of the aura-destroying technology that Walter Benjamin identified with the mechanical reproduction of art centuries later. To transform the roving images of the coins into woodcuts and engravings for further multiplication and transport seems almost a fulfillment rather than an interruption of their original telos of circulation and exchange.

The coin collections of the Renaissance, and the printed books that reproduced them, were a major force in making the culture of classical antiquity—formerly the exclusive property of a small cadre of text-bound
Fig. 2
IMAGINES

foribus templi est ara, in cuius bali duo sunt augurales pulli, farinam colligentes, super illos est imago viri, cum aliis ornamentis compositis ex frondum ligaturis. Ad dextrum aere latus Imperator lorica-tus & galearus consilium, dextra schedam tenens, à cuius tergo duo vi-dentur milites galeari. Lato aere lateri fere dos pallius sinistra schedam tenens, dextra patream in ara sacrificantium, assitit: à cuius tergo du- go duo militis loricae nudatus capitibus conspicatur, sine inscriptione.

MALLIA SCAN TILLA vxor Didii Iuliani Imperatoris. Ab hæc regis Iulianus, Imperium suæpæt, ac potest à Senatu Augustæ et appellata.

DIDIA CLARA Iuliana ex Mallia Scantilla filia, Cornelio repertùo in coniugium tradita, Augustaeque nominata. Post partis in- terum, nonum est abrogatum, sed consensum patrimonium.

PESCENNIUS NIGER ex patre Anno Fis- sce, matre Lampridia naus, mediocris eruditus, mortibus ferox, di- utius

Fig. 3
Jacopo Strada, Epitome thesauri antiquitatum (Lyons, 1553), p. 94: coins of Scantilla, Dida, and Pescennius.
Fig. 4
Enea Vico, *Le imagini con tutti i riveri de gli imperatori* (Venice, 1548), plate showing bronze coins of Nero.
MEDAGLIE ANTIKE. § 3
& Dione, si dice, con tutte le sue sorelle, & ancora che la sua sola era piena di persone, se ne ponessa quando una, & quando un'alt' a sedere à canto da man finissta, haendo sempre la moglie da man destra. Et credesi ch'egli tosghiessa la virginità à Drusilla, essendo ancora fanciullo. Ett dicono che Antonia sua sorella, in casa della quale si alletucano insieme, lo trovò una volta à giacere con lei. Giura, spele siate pel nome di Drusilla, come di quella, di cui teneva più conto, che dell'altra. come leggiamo in Dione, lui hauer dimoostrato nella sua morte. Ondè che vedendo il popolo Romano quelle sue sorelle tanto amate da lui, gli fece per adulatione barnere la me daglia con l'immagine di quelle desiderate dal riuscir, si come in Sueutonio si legge nella nita di Caligula, il quale puntualmente scriue quanto di sopra s'è detto.

Fig. 5
humanists—seem familiar and accessible to all literate Europeans. Claude-Lévi-Strauss reminds us that one of the functions of art is to provide a miniaturized “homologue” of the phenomenal world, creating the illusion that these phenomena can be comprehended, mastered, grasped as it were: “being smaller, the object as a whole seems less formidable. . . .This quantitative transposition extends and diversifies our power.”

16 In turning the pages of Enea Vico’s 1548 Imagini con tutti i riveri, filled with rows and columns of coins showing scenes and symbols of Roman religion, war, commerce, and politics (fig. 4), we find it hard to avoid the “cinematic” sensation that the ancient world is here revealed as a parade of phantoms observed through tiny lenses or portholes, like the eyepiece of a Kinetoscope.17 In the case of a map, this faculty of art to render the universe accessible through miniaturization is obvious, and we are not surprised to learn that a number of the numismatic writers of the Renaissance—Ortelius, Lazio, Symeoni, Sambucus—contributed to the history of cartography as well.

In many instances the medals of Greece and Rome were regarded by humanists as literal miniatures, reduced versions of great sculptural and architectural monuments of antiquity long ago destroyed or buried. Coins showing riders on horseback were identified with the lost equestrian statues mentioned by ancient writers, such as the one set up by Trajan in his forum; and we are not surprised that Leonardo da Vinci copied or adapted coin types of imperial triumphal arches, like the one erected by Claudius to celebrate his invasion of Britain (fig. 5), in his ambitious designs for the equestrian monuments of Francesco Sforza and Gian Giacomo Trivulzio.20 A frequent topos of Renaissance humanism is to compare, contrast, or identify the tiny coins with the colossal architecture of antiquity, a fancy encouraged no doubt by the frequent appearance of temples, palaces, and other public works on Roman imperial medals.21 In a Latin poem by Thomas More praising the collection of one of his Flemish friends, we read: “The pyramids, Busleyden, are not such monuments to their noble dead, as is your little box of coins.”

22 At the end of that ambitious checklist of Roman imperial coins, Adolf Occo’s Imperatorum romanorum numismata of 1579, there is a four-line epigram addressed by the book to the browsing customer in the bookshop, urging the reader to “buy me—the price is not great,” and promising that he will find in these coins the monuments of the men of antiquity, yet “I will be neither heavy to lift nor awkward to carry.” Both More and Occo, of course, play upon the double meaning of monumentum, which can connote a memorial of any size and medium, or a monumental structure in the modern sense.