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The future of numismatics as an academic subject in Austria: in general terms and specifically at the University of Vienna

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The Institute for Numismatics and History of Money (formerly known as the Institute of Ancient Numismatics and Pre-Islamic History of Central Asia) was founded in 1965 as part of the University of Vienna. Professor Robert Göbl, the ambitious and energetic initiator of the project, was appointed as its head. Göbl considered himself to be the heir to Hilarius Eckhel, the founder of scientific numismatics in Vienna in the 18th century. From 1965, one could study Ancient Numismatics in Vienna, the only Austrian University to offer the subject, but only at postgraduate level as study towards a doctorate. I undertook this course, which resulted in my doctoral dissertation *Possible functions of the types and the choice of types within the Greek mints of Sicily*.

The current staff of the coin cabinet in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, which houses one of the five largest and most important coin collections in the world, were all educated at the Institute. Other former students can be found working at other institutions, as well as with coin dealers and auctioneers. Some of this information will be familiar to those who took part in the 2008 Utrecht conference and readers of this paper.

The last two years have seen a revival of the debate on numismatic teaching and numismatics as an academic subject offered by the University of Vienna. Since our global numismatic community is rather small and easy to survey, word of this has reached the ears of our colleagues in other countries. This, together with a conference theme which lent itself to a consideration of the current state and future of the academic study of numismatics in Austria, represented a starting point for me and some of my colleagues to reflect on our roles as numismatists, and the challenges and opportunities that we face.

We adopt the following structure for the body of this paper:

- a) the development of the political and legal framework in Austria, and the history of the Institute within this framework;
- b) the status of the Institute and numismatic studies in the University of Vienna;
- c) an initial attempt to determine their current status in the context of developing social and economic politics and policies;
- d) a brief assessment of the opportunities for numismatics in the current global economic climate;
- e) the measures that could and should be taken.

a) The development of the political and legal framework in Austria and the history of the Institute within this framework

The 1975 reforms essentially introduced democracy into university structures in Austria. Students who had already started to study Ancient Numismatics were still able to take these studies to doctoral level, as in pre-reform days. However, in terms of new students, only those who could demonstrate their knowledge of ancient Greek and Latin with certificates were able to undertake the study of Ancient Numismatics. These reforms also made general changes to study regulations. Students starting their studies after 1975 had to complete two periods of study. If they were successful, they graduated with the title “Magister”. A doctorate could be gained after completion of a third period of study.

At the same time, the remit of Ancient Numismatics was extended to courses on Numismatics and the History of Money, and lectures on National Economics. A *conditio sine qua non* for studying numismatics was a proven knowledge of Latin. However, these studies were merely provisional - an “experiment” - and were not formally constituted. Furthermore, when Göbl retired, his tenured post was not continued. Nowadays, the Institute employs three professors, but none of them with tenured status. In 1995, 2002 and 2005, further reforms initially removed democracy from universities, and brought more changes to the regulation of studies.

Göbl and his successors (all of whom had been taught by him) have effectively educated every professional Austrian numismatist. Two generations on, they carry on with their numismatic work as dealers, researchers and teachers. Thus, all four numismatists at the Viennese coin cabinet had been students of Göbl and his successors, beginning with Dembski, the Director who retired at the end of November 2008, and ending with his successor, who was a student of Hahn, Szaivert and Alram, this last also one of the current curators in the coin cabinet. Their published output is well-known to us all. Some of our German colleagues have also studied in Vienna and, from time to time, taught at the Institute. Students from several other courses have also attended lectures on numismatics, hopefully to their advantage.

Until 2002, the Institute had been through a difficult time, but was still in existence. The study of numismatics as an independent subject was constantly questioned. While one cannot object to any discipline’s being subjected to critical examination, numismatics appeared to have been singled out for particular attention within the humanities’ grouping.

In this same year, universities were taken out of the public sector and effectively privatized. Needless to say, this also involved reorganizations and much insecurity. Finally, in 2007, political factors came into play, with the introduction of a new pan-European protocol for higher education, which aims to create a European Higher Education Area founded on international cooperation and academic exchange, and a common European university system by 2010. This is based on the so-called “Bologna Process”, introduced with the support of twenty-nine European countries in 1999. Currently, forty-six European countries are signed up to the “Process”.

Briefly, it comprises the following elements:

- 1) the introduction of a higher education system which is easily understood and comparable;
- 2) the creation of a system where students can undertake two levels of study: a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree (with a third level – finishing with a PhD – as a future possibility);
- 3) the introduction of a system of credits for academic achievement (ECTS = European Credit Transfer System);
- 4) the introduction of greater mobility for students, teachers, researchers and administrators;
- 5) cooperation in guaranteeing quality;
- 6) promotion of the European dimension for universities.

Austria had already introduced legislation to establish a national framework for implementing the protocol in 2002. Subsequent meetings of European experts have enlarged and refined the main topics, and the third-level PhD was introduced in 2003. A monitoring report in 2007 noted that, by the winter semester of 2006, 67.5% of all relevant Austrian study programmes had implemented the proposals of the “Bologna Process”.

b) The status of the Institute and numismatic studies in the University of Vienna

In the course of introducing the protocol in 2007, political and university interest in Austria focused once more on courses at the Institute for Numismatics and History of Money. For a relatively long period of time, it had been uncertain whether numismatics would survive as a free-standing subject alongside other university studies, but finally with the winter semester of 2008, after a lot of work, three possibilities emerged with the introduction of the new study structure:

- 1) the old form of studies, ending with the award of a diploma and the title “Magister”, will come to an end. Students may complete, but no longer start, their studies within this system;
- 2) there will be no bachelor’s degree in numismatic studies, but the holder of a bachelor’s degree in a related course of studies will be able to study for a master’s degree in numismatics;
- 3) these other related courses will offer extended curricula, and those who wish to obtain a master’s degree in numismatics will have to choose numismatics within this new framework during the years of their bachelor’s-degree studies.

Regulations regarding further study towards the award of a PhD have not yet been finalised, but it is certain that such studies would last at least two years, and possibly count towards tenure.

The new curricula, with all the lectures and other courses, along with the number of ECTS credits attaching to each, have been published in the “Mitteilungsblatt 37/08 of the Institute of Numismatics. At least for the present, numismatics can still be studied at the University of Vienna.

c) An initial attempt to determine their current status in the context of developing social and economic politics and policies

Undoubtedly, improving internal European dialogue and exchange is a very positive step forward. However, one needs to consider the philosophy of the political mainstream that has led this development in a particular direction.

In Austria (and perhaps in other countries), the philosophy of this mainstream is dominated by the mantra “less State, more private”, which has led the State to withdraw from many of the financial responsibilities it formerly undertook. The political arguments are well-known; society must be economical with public funds, which are not limitless, taxation needs to be reduced to stimulate the economy, and institutions such as museums and universities represent luxuries that should not necessarily be State-funded.

It is fair to say that the humanities have always been under more funding pressure than the sciences, as their benefits are less obvious to society, and the need to make greater economies has intensified this differential pressure, with museums and universities bearing the brunt. In the case of the former, blockbusters and high-profile events have replaced exhibitions of real scholarly quality; in the case of the latter, responding to the practical needs of the market economy is more important than providing a liberal education.

Naturally, the taxpayer has the right to ask what happens with his or her money. And politicians, who have to decide how to spend taxpayers' money, also have the right to ask those looking for funding, such as museums and universities, for good supporting arguments, as they themselves are forced to justify their funding decisions.

The situation can get dangerous when political groups are deaf to alternative arguments. A former Austrian Minister of Finance suggested the removal of Arabic Studies from universities, because he could not understand how they could be of any practical use (9/11 had yet to happen).

Fortunately, the political approach of our current Minister of Culture is completely different. She not only recognized the importance of art, culture and education but, as a former banker and prominent business executive, she understood the power of economic arguments, and ordered an economic enquiry into leading cultural institutions, such as the Salzburg Festival and the Kunsthistorisches Museum. The results indicated that all of them create much more economic value than they cost the taxpayer, thus adducing powerful arguments against the current Minister of Finance in defence of the great cultural institutions.

d) A brief assessment of the opportunities for numismatics in the current global economic climate

The financial crisis and economic recession could also offer opportunities for numismatics. European agreements exist on measures to help the economy, and these agreements assign money to the public sector. If museums and universities can present strong and convincing arguments, and develop good public relations programmes, they could profit from this situation.

This could be good practice for future challenges we might have to face. We need to be more aware of the impact of politics on our lives, more particularly, in this context, on our lives as numismatists. We should certainly not accept ideological arguments from politicians that suggest that we are not worth the money we deem necessary to enable us to function efficiently and effectively. However, for the sake of ourselves and future generations of numismatists, we need to seek a consensus on the essential elements of numismatics and how it could be taught and studied with general applicability. The struggle for resources within the universities, which has grown much stronger since they were taken out of the public sector, and the concomitant internecine fighting between academic disciplines, will probably continue for some time, so we must put ourselves in a position to present a strong and universal case for numismatics.

e) **The measures that could and should be taken**

Although numismatics in Austria is still alive and relatively healthy, over time it has been cut back more and more. If we do not want it to disappear in the course of the inevitable next round of university reforms, we should perhaps consider the following “to do” points:

- 1) discuss how numismatics could be of use in other, not necessarily cognate, fields, create alliances within universities and with other “stakeholders” (interest groups such as museums, the Austrian National Bank, the Austrian Mint, numismatic trade associations, the Austrian Academy of Sciences), invest in public relations and lobbying, make an overwhelming general case for the numismatic cause and communicating it widely;
- 2) initiate discussions to determine what constitutes the best numismatic education, identify the best numismatic courses of study and teaching, the characteristics of first-class research in numismatics within both the humanities and sciences, and the contribution made by numismatic activities and exhibitions in museums, galleries, and auction houses;
- 3) dispel, once and for all, the widespread notion that numismatics is merely a useful appendage to other courses of study, and promote its overdue establishment as a discipline and science in its own right, a science responsible for coins and money of all periods and regions, a science with its own distinct language, a science that is also visual, and lends itself to semiotic analysis, and a science that transcends geographical and temporal borders (and Austrian university numismatics would do well to look across the country’s borders and communicate more with the numismatic world outside);
- 4) consider the possibility of holding a small symposium that will offer a platform to discuss these questions.

Editor’s note: *The International Numismatic e-News No. 8 (July 2009), pp 6-7, contains details (in German) of numismatic courses at the Institut für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte in Vienna.*