

The Same River

Author(s): Jonathan Hollow

Email: jph41@kent.ac.uk

Source: *Brief Encounters*, Vol. 1 No. 11 (October 2026), pp. 1–14.

URL: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/article/id/249>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.249>

This short story speculates about the technological and philosophical development of the Roman world, focusing on a gap that has intrigued me from the start of my doctoral research into the Roman economy: why is it that the Roman state, for all its willingness to address distinct economic problems, seems never to have developed ideas about how they might be linked? It takes place during the summer of 45 BC, and is inspired by the Roman politician and thinker Cicero, who that year was accommodating himself to the new dictatorial politics of Julius Caesar, and was unsure of where to direct his considerable energies. Atticus was Cicero's intellectual soulmate; his evasion of any fixed political identity enabled him to be one of the most connected people in Rome. Caesar was assassinated in March 44 BC, while he was planning a military expedition to Parthia and beyond.

Additional academic notes follow at the end.

© Jonathan Hollow

License (open-access): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. No warranty, express or implied, is given. Nor is any representation made that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for any actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Brief Encounters is an open access journal that supports the dissemination of knowledge to a global readership. All articles are free to read and accessible to all with no registration required. For more information please visit our journal homepage: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk>.

In association with

The Same River

Jonathan Hollow

It was June in my thirty-fifth year, and I was in the nook in my master's library in Tusculum. Tiro had set me copying, then slipped away to conduct some secretarial business of his own. But I couldn't help eavesdropping on a conversation between Cicero and Atticus, pattering away in the next bay alongside the sound of rain.

Sometimes copying is easy. The letters parade along by themselves, giving you that dim sense of peering into the other person's thinking – as if you are looking at a column of men marching, glimpsed through a hedge of cypress trees: a flash of helmet here, a ripple of crimson there. But I had been given Antiochus' *Canonica* to copy, which grinds through his structure of logic in a series of dull thumps, like the tedious beat of a washerwoman. My mind was already drifting when Atticus caught my ear. Unlike my master, he was never a bore.

"Have you ever wondered, Cicero, about what happens when you lose a coin?" Atticus' tone was playful, even condescending, and it rested on the warm cushion of a good lunch and fine wine enjoyed out in the sunshine, on a blazing June day. When the skies turned black, they had retreated into the library.

There was a puzzled pause. "Never, and why should I?" This was Cicero's tone of flat, time-saving dismissal, and he never quite knew when to hold it back – even when supposedly relaxing with his friends. I could tell he found the question banal to the point of bafflement, but in my experience, Atticus was never unintentionally banal. And so, I was distracted.

"If a coin is lost, does that mean there is one less to spend?"

"Of course!" No hesitation.

"So, let us say a dupondius disappears down a drain... you lose it in the baths. Somebody in the tavern wants to sell you wine for a dupondius. You can still buy it, can you not?"

"Of course I can, I have... well, countless thousands more."

"But at some point, a poor man will lose his last dupondius. Then a wine-seller will not be able to sell."

"He will sell it to someone else!"

"But somewhere across all our territories, it must be the case that there is a wine-seller who cannot sell because a coin has been lost. Yet his wine is still there. It has value, with or without a coin."

At this point there was a very long pause. After trying to hear it out, I finally picked up my pen and looked again over the rippling sea of logic curled in front of me. I smoothed my papyrus, and was just about to make a further mark when —

“Atticus, where are you going with this?”

“I don’t know where I’m going. I’m asking *you* where I’m going. It’s more a question of where I’m coming from.”

“Very well then, where are you coming from?”

“The letter you wrote in March, from Astura. Do you remember saying you had discovered 600,000 sesterces in your villa?”

At this point there was a pause, one I could tell was pregnant with thought. I had seen my master like this so many times that there was no need for me to be looking at his face. It was what I called his gaming face. The game – almost always, at least until recently – was politics. When suddenly he spied a political possibility, an exit, his body would freeze like a statue; and while his eyes would face his interlocutor with great intent, they were in fact seeing nothing. Just as in the Antiochus text in front of me, the levers of logic were working, the gates of possibility were creaking open.

But the gates opened, and nothing emerged. Because next: “Yes... I do... I was bored, I was, as you know, *grieving*, I wandered around the house, emptying cupboards here and there. I piled it all up on the table and counted it myself. It was a useful distraction. It came to a lot. Well, a fair amount. But what of it?”

At this point Atticus’s voice was less playful, more thoughtful. He was looking somewhere in his mind, and he was not confident that Cicero would see to the same place. He spoke evenly, but with a few halting uncertainties here and there.

“I found myself thinking about it, while I was bathing the other day. Six hundred thousand could buy a small farm. And yes, you found it, you gathered it all together. But what if it had *not* been found? Let us suppose you had decided to deliberately hide the coins in one place for safekeeping, when you left in March. You returned to Rome. You unexpectedly died —”

“Charming, my dear Atticus!”

At this point Atticus’ voice sped up. “My dear Cicero, this is an experiment in thinking, I will never wish your death, but men our age die unexpectedly all the time. You die; nobody finds the coins. The coins are worth a small farm. Now they cannot be found, because they are hidden and nobody knows where. Perhaps nobody even knew you had them. *You* hardly knew you had them. So the money is lost forever. What is the overall effect?”

“Effect on what?”

"If the loss of such coins has *no* effect on buying and selling across the Republic, then that tells us something about the coins. I'm really not sure what." He paused for a moment. "But if it *does* have an effect, we would do well to understand it, because people lose coins every day. They don't lose a farm's worth of coins each, of course, but collectively... how many hundreds of thousands of sesterces disappear across our vast territories every day?"

At this point Cicero leaned forward towards Atticus, and this meant I caught a glimpse of his movement through a gap in the cabinet. This slight, bright patch of fabric was a sign that he was now truly interested. As a result, he became brisk. He wanted to chop the logic himself.

"We both know that the Board of Three mints new coins every year. Or most years. So why worry about lost coins?"

"Yes, of course they do. But they do not count the lost coins, so the coins they mint are not intended to replace them, or might even be more than is needed. This, Cicero, is what I have really been thinking about."

"Please, Atticus, let me in to your thoughts."

"I realised I am not really sure what the Board *do* take into account when deciding whether to mint coins. Of course, the thing they *constantly* worry about is whether they have enough silver from the mines, or gold from our conquests, to mint. But gold and silver are simply what luck and the bounty of the earth deliver to us, the favours of Fortune when she smiles on our conquests. This bounty has no connection with the harvests, with the tradesmen, with the storms, with what is going on in the meat and fruit markets. Take those new 'cherries' everyone is now obsessed with, the things that came from Pontus. A few decades ago, nobody knew they even existed – but now they fetch a dupondius a handful – they are piled high everywhere – the carts cannot bring them fast enough. All these things change with their own rhythm. And when the rhythm changes, the need for coins changes. That includes the bronze coins; not just our gold and silver pieces. But the Board of Three... well, I found myself asking: do they listen to this rhythm? Should they?"

I realised now I had not written a word for quite a while, and before long this would be detectable, if anyone cared to check. But my tongue was also burning, and I was desperate to spit what I had to say out of my mouth.

There was a further pause while Cicero digested all this. He stood up. It was his habit to pace around when he was struggling with restless or incomplete ideas. What I did next was quite instinctive, because had I had time to think about it, I should never have dared. As he moved into the line of sight beyond my bay, I cocked my head and whispered: "Master!"

A stormcloud flashed across his face. His mind was swirling around higher things, and had been interrupted by the banality of everyday existence. He probably expected me to ask for more ink, or to go to relieve myself. "*What, boy?*"

That '*boy*' was dangerous. It forced my answer out in a rush: "Please master, I hope you don't mind, I couldn't help hearing your conversation, and I know what the Board does. Well, what their slaves do."

He almost spat with anger: "How *dare* a slave listen to a *private conversation!*" (Of course usually, if I was attending on him, he wanted me to anticipate his every need, which I could only do by listening in. A scroll should pass into his hand at almost the moment he had mentioned it. But nobody ever claimed that masters are fair.)

I was about to apologise again, but before I could, Atticus' voice echoed round to both of us. "For my part, I want to know what they *do* do."

Atticus stood up too, and within a moment they were both staring at me: Cicero with anger, Atticus with amusement. "Come Cicero, let us learn, rather than be set to anger."

Cicero crossly said: "How could *he* know?"

"Let us find out! Tell us, Jaspis."

I was frightened at how deep I was in at this point, but I also knew that I *did* know. "The Board have a slave, Nardillus, who goes to the market every three months and takes two hundred of each lesser coin. He sorts them into piles according to how worn and smooth they are. He counts the piles. He tells Pharnaces Felix, the freedman, the numbers for each pile and each coin. When the piles of worn coins are increasing, Pharnaces suggests to the Board more of that coin is needed."

"Are you making this up?" Cicero was far from convinced.

"You bought me from Pharnaces, master."

"I did not buy you. *Terentia* did." His ex-wife's name was not a happy word these days. But my origin had taken the wind out of his sails. He had forgotten, or simply never knew, where she had bought me. "But why?"

"Why what, master?"

"What is the point of this coin-counting? A worn coin is still accepted by everyone!"

"The more worn the coins are, the more hands they have passed through. If they have passed through more hands, there is more trading. This shows the point when we might need more coins."

Cicero raised himself up a little on his heels. "Why have I never heard about this?" He paused for effect. "I was Consul of Rome!"

"Master, Pharnaces Felix always said the Board were only interested in the gold and silver coins. They took little interest in the smaller coins that poorer people depend on."

At this moment, a very interesting expression crossed Cicero's face. Perhaps it was the same expression I should have seen had I witnessed Jupiter hearing for the first time about the awkward realities of the Styx. It seemed that Cicero, ruler of Rome, champion of its masses, had never truly grasped that his poorer citizens were stuck in a world where tedious bronze coins were all that ever passed through their hands, and handling a gold aureus or a silver denarius was luck, theft or fantasy. He realised this, and he speedily suppressed the realisation, as if he had swallowed a bitter but negligible grape-pip.

Whenever this sort of minor embarrassment was coming into view, he would hare off rapidly in the other direction, making sure he was well clear. So, this was what he did now, raising himself a little towards Atticus, as if I were not there:

"Must Rome" (with Caesar inching towards a throne, Cicero could hardly speak of the Senate and the People with a straight face) "take on all the cares of the world? We send slaves into markets to count coins, must we now have a slave in every household, every temple, counting the coins parading in and out?" He unconsciously plucked his cloak to straighten it for his coming aria, ignoring the resigned amusement on Atticus' face. "Does the tailor need tracking? The fuller following? The mason monitoring? We sail on the seas but our ships will never govern their waves, and everyone would agree that coins flow in and out of our markets like a tide, with their ebbs and flows – just like any other natural force we do not control – for money itself is like the sea —"

"Like a river!"

This time I had spoken so impulsively I did not even know why. He turned to glare at me with twice the intensity of moments ago.

"You eavesdrop – then you interrupt – you are heading for a beating, boy!"

My tongue had gone from hot to dry. I was flushing red. I stared at him in panic. There was something at the back of my dusty mental corridors, something I was reaching for, some reason, some logic, some...

Some *authority*! I had it. "Master, I am so sorry, but your words reminded me of Abdaraxus. He wrote about money being like a river, it was a marvellous poem, it suddenly sprang to mind, I couldn't help myself."

His hot face almost popped with scorn. "Abdaraxus?! That Greek maker of trinkets and toys?"

"He is famous for his inventions, master, but he did write two long poems. One was about money. I copied it, at Atticus' house."

He turned to Atticus. "Is this true?" Atticus chewed on the thought for a few moments. "I'm not sure about the copying, Cicero, but I do have some faint idea that Abdaraxus also left us some poems. When did you copy it, Jaspis?"

"It was five summers ago, master, when Cicero left me with you at your house in Athens. You went away, but a ship came into the Piraeus with books that were not in your library, and you had left money to pay to make copies of anything that turned up."

"That is probably how it was. Yes. I do remember being told I had some additions. But what of this poem, Jaspis?"

I paused for a moment. I remembered glimpses. What could I summon up?

*"Ever the river carves its curved course through the meadow,
Drifting under daylight, a necklace tumbling from a silken sack.
Bronze in the morning, silver at noon, and gold in the twilight:
Bright are the waves that bear the dreams of craftsmen and traders."*

Cicero said, surprisingly gently this time, "We might want you to write it down for the poetry, Jaspis. What is the gist?"

"I don't think I'll be able to remember all the lines, master, but I do remember the opening quite well."

"And the rest?"

"Abdaraxus likens money to a river. He writes about when a river runs wide and shallow, nourishing the roots of many trees and meadows. He describes when a valley narrows, and the same river must flow hard and fast, pushing on the banks with great pressure. And he talks about the boats of traders and craftsmen bobbing on the river, and how hard it is for them to navigate, when the river is too narrow and too fast. He writes about the dangers of the river flooding its plains – that is, too many coins – or the opposite, scouring the banks to lifeless stone when it is too powerful and fast. Then he talks about the many ways that men can control rivers, with dams, canals, banks and aqueducts. It is more than a fancy or a dream. It is..." I searched for the words. "It is a system."

There was a pause while they both digested this. Cicero screwed up his eyes. "Why don't I have a copy of this poem?"

I spent the rest of the afternoon doing my best to summon up and write down as much as I could remember. When I had finished, I took it to them, and Cicero tartly seized it. They then talked long into the night.

After this, Abdaraxus' poem became an important beast of prey, central to further conversations and extended correspondence between Cicero and Atticus. All these were handled by Tiro. Although from time to time I was sent in to recite the odd part of what I had written down, I played no part otherwise. There were various discussions in my presence about rivers, and at one point they even considered sending for an aqueduct engineer who might join their conversation. But, if you will forgive my jest, I felt they were out of their depth. What I *could* tell, however, is that every time I ran through the fragments of the poem, it gave them more and more to think about.

I was sent to ask for it around the other gentlemen's libraries in Tusculum, and then, when we returned to Rome, I scoured even more places, but with no success. Atticus had written to his steward in Athens for the scroll, so my searches were only intended to speed things up. But after the usual delay we got a reply, and it was unexpected. A whole box of scrolls had been attacked by silverfish, and Abdaraxus had been among them. The steward had delicately collected the fragments into a bag, but this was hopeless. The different scrolls were mixed together, and anyway, it was like sifting through already-rotted autumn leaves. Despite some rather keen pressure from Atticus, I simply could not remember the name of the ship, nor its master. The trail had vanished, like footsteps fading into sand. But, disconnected as I was, I could tell that Cicero's imagination was still running hot. He was occupied with his other philosophical work, yet I could tell it gave him no passion.

Autumn turned into winter. There was nothing else I was asked to do about Abdaraxus, but gradually a few more lines came back here and there, and when they did, I scribbled them down.

Then I learned that Atticus was back in Rome, and that (this was, somehow, connected) he had persuaded Caesar to dine with Cicero.

At that point I was asked to recite all the fragments to them a couple more times. Tiro was present, scribbling down further notes. I had found myself to be the only copy of a book they rather needed, so I was treated with some care as a result. I was forbidden to leave the house during the week before the meal with Caesar. It became apparent that Atticus and Cicero had an agenda. Of course, everyone had an agenda with Caesar, so the trick was to make the whole occasion seem so casual and relaxed that the agenda only peeked out when Caesar himself wanted it. I heard a lot of chatter of Cicero's anxieties about the food, and of some tensions between him and Atticus' cook.

Then, the day before, I was told that I would need to be there, ready to recite my Abdaraxus if required. Tiro broke the news to me gently, as he knew I would not take it well. It was a frosty December day, and no matter how close I got to the brazier, I could

not rid myself of the chill of fear. There did not seem to be any way of getting this right. I only had fragments of the poem: would anyone ever be happy with that? If Caesar liked the poem, mere fragments would never satisfy him. If he disliked it, it would be my fault for not remembering it in its entirety.

"Why can't you take what I have written down, and recite it to them, Tiro?"

"Cicero wants Caesar to know that this poem is real, and I'm afraid your fearful performance will be the most effective way of removing any doubts about that part of the story."

"Why will it matter to Caesar whether Abdaraxus said this or not?"

"That, Jaspis, is a very good question. I do not know the answer. But Cicero is convinced that it will."

I followed Cicero over to Atticus' house by the fourth hour, and was given some bread and cheese. By the tenth hour, waiting outside the triclinium, I was as nervous as I could ever be. Caesar never travelled light, even though there were no bodyguards. A selection of grim-faced secretaries, assistants and even a priest were crowding the reception room and corridor with me. The only thing that gave me comfort was an occasional burst of laughter from inside, but towards the eleventh hour, I could sense that the conversation had turned more serious, and perhaps, rather taut.

Finally, there was a creak of the door and the steward briefly looked around, creating a flurry of attention among Caesar's entourage, like pigeons fluttering in the Forum. His curt nod summoned me in.

Seven of them were there dining, all suitably reclined. I could see some faces that were a little the worse for wine. But in the middle, *he* looked different: sharp-faced, lean, his features exaggerated by the light of an oil-lamp nearby. I remember him placing a silver cup on the low table with the precision of a craftsman, as the room fell to silence around him.

"Imperator" – Cicero's delivery of the word was smooth enough to muffle any private doubts, but unexpected enough to set a flicker on Caesar's face – "This boy is our only copy of the poem, and we thought you should hear it. I should warn you that he cannot remember it all."

Caesar looked at me with amusement. Happily, this was an expression I had become used to since the poem became such a crux between Cicero and Atticus. "Caesar's expectations have been raised greatly, young slave. Do not dash them."

Was I addressing a man, or a god? In the years since, I have done everything I can to summon up every detail, discern the difference, sift all the signs. Like all the other men, he was eating and reclining. He needed the light of the oil-lamps; he did not cast his own. But I have always felt, for reasons I can never explain, no matter how hard I look back on it, that there were spirits as well as men in that room. He had murdered millions in Gaul; did some of those spirits always shadow him? I had to gaze at one of the frescoes on the wall to still myself and turn my mind away from fear.

"Ever the river carves its curved course through the meadow..." And so I proceeded, filling the gaps between the remembered fragments as best I could, gaining some confidence as the river flowed forward. After I don't know how long, I had given everything I could. Cicero gestured at me to step aside, but I had been told I was not to leave, in case I was needed for the odd quotation. I stepped into deep shadows in the corner.

Caesar began. "You are trying to convince me, gentlemen, that there is a problem to be solved. Beautiful though the poem is, I still cannot see it. A gold coin is a gold coin."

Atticus was about to speak, but Cicero interrupted him. "Imperator, I must be very candid with you. Atticus and I have been discussing this for months now, and we too cannot agree on the exact problem. But we wanted to place it all before your wisdom," (at this point I think he *believed* he was being sincere, but it was so very hard to prise apart his self-interest from his beliefs) "because your far-sightedness is reshaping our Republic in so many ways, and just as it was hard to govern so widely using the old ways, there may come a time when our coins are not enough for our empire. We fit our armies to our borders, but we do not tailor our money to our markets."

"Yet another metaphor!" Caesar was not amused. His next words came out with a chiselled coldness. "Shall I tell you what *my* problem is? My problem is that I do not possess Parthia, or Arabia, or India. That is a practical, tangible problem. You know it is one I intend to solve." Then, catching the rising expression on Cicero's face, he corrected himself. "Worse, we, we, the Roman people, *we* are not the masters of Parthia, Arabia, or India."

Cicero blushed. "I know you have plans."

"I *do* have plans! I am making plans. You shall hear more about my plans. I'm talking about controlling the world, and you are babbling about lost coins." He paused. "If we keep our silver coins pure, and my gold ones too, all will be well. This has worked for hundreds of years, has it not, Atticus?" He turned towards Atticus, with a smudge of deference towards his host, and more than a hint of a snub towards Cicero.

Atticus replied calmly, "Purity and number flow in different directions, Caesar. The gold you brought back from Gaul was very pure, but there was so much, it flooded Rome; suddenly, gold bought less silver. You cannot foresee how many mines will be found in new mountains. There might be too many mines, or too few, in your Parthia and beyond. What then? This is, if I may say so, my lord, the point about looking ahead. You have set right our calendar, which has caused us no end of trouble for hundreds of years. We now turn your thoughts to our money."

"Mines! When I run out of mines in India, I will take our legions south of the Sahara."

Cicero took the pause, as well as a risk with a more pointed familiarity. "The point is, Caesar, that gold and silver are finite. At some point they *will* run out. But trade goes on forever, it comes from the cycles of nature, which always renew themselves. Must our money always match our mines?"

Caesar's eyes glinted towards Cicero. He looked as if he was about to speak, but then he demurred. Nobody else dared. Caesar looked down at the silver cup in front of him.

"You always were one to mint a fine phrase, Cicero, but you may have given me something to think about."

Another long pause.

"If the two cleverest men in Rome think this is important, perhaps there is no harm in thinking about it further."

He was still for a few moments again.

"What do you actually want me to do?"

Atticus said softly, "You need cleverer men than us to think further about this, Caesar. We thought you should ask..." (he paused with a small cough of propriety) "... Queen Cleopatra. Ask her who should come from Alexandria. Her best mathematicians."

"Is it a mathematical problem, or a social problem? Or even a metallurgical one?"

This was so good that it caught Cicero off-guard with its precision. "That, dear Caesar, is a very good question. A *very* good question, and I hope I will somehow find the answer to it." I noted with relief that his familiarity had gone unchecked.

"I will ask Cleopatra about mathematicians. Yes, Cicero, you will have to bury your differences with her. You will hear from her somehow. Send for ten men. You can lead their deliberations and find out if you are in fact as clever as you hope you are."

Cicero took this in good grace. "Very well, Caesar."

"I will be busy with preparations for Parthia throughout the spring. You will busy yourself with this. I want conclusions, mind you, not metaphors!"

I could feel the tension easing in the room. I tried to stay even more invisible, lest I disrupted it.

"When would it be your pleasure to discuss it again?"

"When you are ready!" Caesar paused for a moment. "But Caesar does not delay forever. You may get your men from Egypt by... when, March? Bring me something in April."

Of course, dear reader, you know the rest. Within two years, both Caesar and Cicero were dead. Tiro is dead. I too, soon, will be dead. Abdaraxus is long dead. My last hope of a copy of his poem was the Library of Alexandria, but when Caesar had burned the harbour, its warehouses had burned too, and it turned out that all of Abdaraxus' scrolls went up in those flames of war. Time swallows us all. Yet every corridor, no matter how resolutely it might confront you with a dead-end cabinet full of precious scrolls, always – in truth – has two exits.

Academic note: This story has been carefully considered to fit into what we do know happened during 45 BC, and is shaped by historical records. On January 1, 45 BC, Caesar had introduced a new calendar, remaking time in Rome.¹ In spring that year, Cicero wrote a letter to Atticus saying that he could see he had 600,000 sesterces at hand in one of his country villas.² Atticus was subsequently with Cicero during June 45 BC.³ And Caesar dined with Cicero once that winter at Puteoli; this story invents a second such event in Rome.⁴

Tiro was Cicero's literary secretary – now a freedman, once his slave. Jaspis is an invention. It is worth considering that a slave in his position may well have "read" far more books than Cicero, although without the leisure to consider their meaning closely.

Abdaraxus is a name known from a sole 2nd century BC Greek papyrus. He was considered an inventor so important that he was in a "hall of fame" alongside the five great sculptors of the Greek world. But all his works have now been lost.⁵ It was quite common for the Greek and Roman writers to express philosophical ideas in the form of poetry.

1 E. J. (Elias Joseph) Bickerman, with Cornell University Press, *Chronology of the Ancient World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 47.

2 Cic. Att. XII.25.1 (SB 264).

3 Cic. Att. XIII.31 (SB 302).

4 Cic. Att. XIII.42 (SB 354).

5 Lucio Russo, *The Forgotten Revolution: How Science Was Born in 300 BC and Why It Had to Be Reborn* (Springer, 2004), p. 96.

India and the Sahara were both known to Romans at this time; India having been partially conquered by Alexander the Great 280 years earlier, and the Sahara better known because of its proximity to Roman North Africa. Less than 30 years after Caesar's assassination, there was a Roman expedition deep into the Sahara.⁶

There is no precedent at all for the conceit at the heart of this story: that leading Roman intellectuals (of which Julius Caesar was one) might have begun to feel their way towards a state theory of money. I am fairly confident that this never happened, despite the considerable monetisation and dynamic trading links the Roman empire imposed on the Mediterranean world, and despite the vast coercive power of the Roman state. To my knowledge, we have nothing anywhere in surviving Roman literature that theorises the quantity or velocity of money. We can certainly detect Romans eventually noticing inflation, but we have no evidence that they developed a theoretical understanding of it.⁷ All that said, we know that the surviving Roman literature does not cover evenly all the technical drivers that the Roman state must have needed to function, so absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. I decided that the best way to think further about the questions raised by this absence was through the medium of fiction.

We can say with great confidence that the Roman approach to the minting of *coins* was carefully thought through, and under this period of Caesar's typically intense personal control, stable.⁸ It was governed at this time by a Board of Three after the turbulent period during the civil war when Caesar minted his own gold coins.⁹ The counting of worn coins is my invention. As far as "paper" money is concerned, we have tantalising suggestions that private banking transactions must have been used to avoid the transport of millions of coins for long-distance shipping transactions, but sadly, how information and credit were managed in these transactions remains an important mystery.¹⁰

Space did not permit it, but a tempting longer direction for the exploration of state power in this story arose from Caesar's adulterous relationship with Queen Cleopatra of Egypt. Her leading city, Alexandria, had not only the most important library in the ancient world; this was complemented by the Sanctuary of the Nine Muses (the original *Museum*),

6 Pliny, *NH*, V.35–6.

7 Monica Hellström, 'Diocletian, Roman Emperor, 284–313 CE', in *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (2015).

8 Arnaud Suspène and others, 'Gold for a Revolution: The Sources of Caesar's Gold Coinage', in *AVREVS. Le Pouvoir de l'or / The Power of Gold*, ed. by Suspène A and others, 171 (Ausonius, 2023), ScriptaAntiqua, pp. 411–30 <<https://hal.science/hal-04238451>> [accessed 13 May 2026].

9 Bernhard E. Woytek, 'The Denarius Coinage of the Roman Republic', in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Coinage*, ed. by William E. Metcalf (Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 322, doi:[10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195305746.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195305746.001.0001).

10 P. Kay, *Rome's Economic Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 108, doi:[10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199681549.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199681549.001.0001).

a vibrant community of state-funded scholars freed from any teaching obligations. Remarkably, the Roman Empire never developed anything remotely similar.

Some of the tensions surrounding Caesar's dictatorial rule in Rome during 45/44 BC suggest that he might have had the intention to be proclaimed a king *outside* Italy, remaining a Republican dictator *inside* it.¹¹ Had this proclamation ever taken place, then, among other matters, he would have had to navigate, and perhaps absorb, the example of intellectual state power established by Cleopatra's family of Greek rulers of Egypt. Within my story, I can imagine Cicero and Atticus deciding to exploit this direction of travel to make the case for a Museum-type scholarly community in Rome. This would have made for interesting dialogue, given Cicero's detestation of Cleopatra, and the fact that Caesar appears to have accidentally burned down a substantial portion of the Library of Alexandria's collection when he fought his civil war.

From the point of view of characterisation, nobody who has read Robert Harris's *Cicero* trilogy can escape the compelling summons he has made to bring Cicero back from the dead; here I acknowledge my debts.

¹¹ John H. Collins, 'Caesar and the Corruption of Power', *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte*, 4.4 (1955), pp. 445–65 (p. 463).

Bibliography

- Bickerman, E. J. (Elias Joseph), with Cornell University Press, *Chronology of the Ancient World* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980)
- Cicero, Marcus Tullius, with Titus Pomponius Atticus and D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Letters to Atticus. Vol. 3*, Loeb Classical Library 97 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999)
- Collins, John H., 'Caesar and the Corruption of Power', *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte*, 4.4 (1955), pp. 445–65
- Hellström, Monica, 'Diocletian, Roman Emperor, 284–313 CE', in *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (2015)
- Kay, P., *Rome's Economic Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2014), doi:[10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199681549.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199681549.001.0001)
- Pliny. *Natural History, Volume II: Books 3–7*. Translated by H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library 352 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942)
- Russo, Lucio, *The Forgotten Revolution: How Science Was Born in 300 BC and Why It Had to Be Reborn* (Springer, 2004)
- Suspène, Arnaud, and others, 'Gold for a Revolution: The Sources of Caesar's Gold Coinage', in *AVREVS. Le Pouvoir de l'or / The Power of Gold*, ed. by Suspène A and others, 171 (Ausonius, 2023), ScriptaAntiqua, pp. 411–30 <<https://hal.science/hal-04238451>> [accessed 13 May 2026]
- Woytek, Bernhard E., 'The Denarius Coinage of the Roman Republic', in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Coinage*, ed. by William E. Metcalf (Oxford University Press, 2012), doi:[10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195305746.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195305746.001.0001)