FOUNTAINS OF FORTUNE

and the Bryant Park “Hoard”

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Introduction

New York City’s Bryant Park, a 9.5-acre refuge from the chaos of Times Square a block away, serves many functions for tourists and residents alike, but mainly for quiet contemplation. In the midst of the park is an elegant granite fountain, designed by Charles A. Platt (1861–1933), that like any such fountain anywhere is a magnet for people seeking some luck, hoping for a wish to come true, or simply having fun (figs. 1–2). In the spirit of the ancient Celts flinging, throwing or sinking coins into lakes, rivers, and wells, or ancient Greeks paying their tribute to the resident nymph of fountain-shrines—thousands toss coins into Platt’s fountain every year, mostly US coins, but also hundreds of foreign ones. This is a study of the foreign coins collected over the course of a year, a “hoard” that tells us a great deal about the visitors to the Big Apple.

What happens to the coins thrown into a fountain? Visitors and residents alike throw coins in many fountains and rivers all around the world. Legend has it that whoever throws a coin into the Trevi Fountain (fig. 3) in Rome will be granted a return trip to the Eternal City. Coins are to be thrown using the right hand over one’s left shoulder. In Lucerne, Switzerland, it is a tradition to toss a coin over one’s shoulder into the pond fronting the cliff hosting the Lion of Lucerne (fig. 4)—a monumental tribute to the 760 Swiss soldiers who gave their lives to the King of France Louis XVI, as he had given orders not to fire on the crowd that stormed the Royal Palace of the Tuileries on a fateful night in August 1792. The sums tossed into such ponds and fountains are not inconsiderable: about $4,000 is retrieved daily from the Trevi Fountain, collected by a charitable organization, while homeless persons may also benefit from this custom in many different locations. The Bryant Park fountain cannot compete with the Trevi, but still around $3,000 is collected annually, mostly US coins. They are used to help the Bryant Park Corporation, a not-for-profit dedicated to the support, restoration, and operation of the park. Foreign coins tossed into the fountain are generally of such small value that it is not worth the effort to attempt to exchange them; their value instead lies in statistical analysis.

Le Tour du Monde en Quatre-Vingts Jours?

From the Bryant Park Corporation, I received 732 foreign coins, 19 tokens, and the few US cents that had not been brought to the bank or removed by some of the park’s visitors, collected between the summers of 2012 and 2013 (fig. 5). As they were all mixed-up and sometimes worn and hard to decipher, I sought the help of my children Jeanne (11) and Felix (9) Bransbourg, whose younger eyes were better suited for the task (fig. 6). Through snow days and days-off at school, they managed enthusiastically to sort out this big load of coins within a period of about two months, traveling around the world in less than the 80 days of Jules Verne! Then they created an Excel spreadsheet and entered each coin alongside its country, its date, and denomination, resulting in a double-entry database. Excellent dumplings from neighboring Chinatown rewarded the hard-working team.

How long did these coins circulate before ending in a pool of water—and finally in the ANS vault? The oldest coin in our sample belongs to the small

1. I wish to thank Jérôme Barthes, former Vice President for the Bryant Park Corporation, for his willingness to share this “hoard” for study.
2. Justin, 32; Strabo, 4.1.13.
group of US cents that was not sent to the bank by the Bryant Park Corporation: a 1936 cent, with the wheat ears reverse used between 1909 and 1958. Another old cent from 1957 shares the same design. We encountered as well a British 1955 five-shilling coin, while a 1936 50-centimes silver coin from French Indochina had been previously removed by the Bryant Park staff, one of their most interesting finds to date. Generally, however, apart from few really old coins, most found in the fountain were issued within the last 15 or so years.

**Numerical Analysis of the Coin Sample**

The 732 foreign coins originate from no less than 76 different monetary issuers—or 86 countries by counting each Eurozone member state as a single entity—representing more than a third of the 196 countries recognized in the world to date. Their aggregated value was $91.34 at early 2014 exchange rates at the time of our study, i.e., about 3% of the total amount collected annually in the fountain. The vast majority of the coins tossed in the water are US coins, mostly cents, some of them probably thrown by foreign visitors, but something we are unable to account for. Among the foreign coins, there is little surprise that some countries are well represented—for example, the United Kingdom (123), Canada (73), France (36) or Mexico (24) were not expected to be so well represented. Coins from others, such as Russia with 51 coins, Argentine and Israel with 28 each, Chile with 22, or Japan with 19 were not expected to be so well represented. Coins from more distant, or smaller, less accessible, or less connected countries found their way to the waters of Bryant Park as well. There are, for example, unique samples from Albania, Azerbaijan, Barbados, Bolivia, Brunei, the Caribbean Islands, Croatia, Cuba, Ghana, Iceland, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Morocco, Nicaragua, Norway, Peru, Suriname, Vietnam, and Zambia.

The country ranking, whether by number of coins or dollar-equivalent value, is more or less in tune with the country ranking of annual visitors from abroad to New York City (10.9 million out of a total of 52.7 million international and domestic visitors), as shown by comparing charts 1–3.

**Are some nationalities throwing more valuable coins?** The striking difference between chart 2 (number of coins) and chart 3 (monetary value) lies with how the Eurozone stands out. Does it mean rich countries give away higher value coins? The answer is not that simple, and, in many respects, should rather be a “no.” Here we need to look at the average value of the coins, grouped by countries or relevant country groups (chart 4).

This country ranking looks very different from the previous charts. If we put aside the case of Bolivia, which is not statistically significant since here there was a unique coin of high denomination, there is no striking difference between rich and poorer nations.

If some poor countries do tend to appear at the very end of the chart, the correlation with the GDP per capita is rather weak, as exemplified by the fact Canada or the United Kingdom stand far below Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, or Kenya. What seems to matter more is the denominational structure of each country’s coinage. The case of Honduras is illustrative: the available denominations are ten-, twenty- and fifty-centavos coins. As one US dollar purchases 19.21 Honduran lempira, the result is a denominational range of US$ cents, broken down by countries or relevant country groups.

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3. The 18 Eurozone countries have been consolidated into a single country, since a coin minted in France does not necessarily mean a French resident tossed it—Euros are legal tender throughout the zone and circulate extensively outside of their minting country. The statistics provided by New York City do not offer any breakdown over the Middle East (beside Israel) and Eastern Europe and, as such, we aggregated the coins individual countries in those cases.
between 0.5 and 2.6 US cents. The one-lempira denomination (= 5 US cents) is represented by a banknote. Honduras may not be a rich country, but its current $2,323 GDP per capita places it ahead of countries such as India, and Kenya, or on par with Indonesia, Philippines, and Ukraine. Nevertheless, all these countries rank ahead of Honduras in our sample, for the simple reason that higher coined denominations are available. In India, the five-rupee coin is worth 8 US cents while, most strikingly, the 40-shilling coin is worth almost 50 US cents in Kenya. If we had received the US sample from Bryant Park for study, for instance, there is little doubt that the fact that none of the most current coins circulating in the US exceeds a 25-cent denomination would have skewed the average US value towards a very low number compared to the Eurozone, where €2 (= $2.70) coins are in high supply. This is not to say that some poorer countries don’t tend to develop a denominational system where coins of lower values are represented, sometimes for the simple reason that their national currency has experienced significant devaluations, but that the respective average wealth does not stand out as the single most significant factor. Moreover, it could be argued that the wealth of international travelers tends to remain above the average wealth in the originating country. Traveling is still a luxury good in many parts of the world, something rich nations tend to forget.

Irrespective of where tourists come from, an average value ranging from 5 to 15 US cents range incorporates most of the countries displayed by our sample. This then must represent the international cost index of purchasing good luck.

The Price of Good Fortune

The next visible factor affecting the value of the coins thrown into the water seems to relate to cultural traits, which are more difficult to explain but are very visible as far as the results are concerned. The comparative case of the Eurozone and Australia on one hand, and of the United Kingdom and Canada on the other, is illustrative. Europeans and Australians throw higher denominations than Brits and Canadians, but a relatively lower number of coins when the numbers of visitors are taken into account—see charts 1, 2 and 3: Europeans left 143 coins vs. 123 for the Brits, although there are almost three times many visitors from the Eurozone than from the UK. Similarly, there are about twice as many Canadian than Australian visitors, with 73 vs. 12 coins respectively. Two solutions are plausible: individual Brits and Canadians throw more coins, but of smaller aggregate denominations than their European or Australian counterparts; or a higher proportion of European and Australian visitors don’t throw any coins at all, while those who decide to do so are more serious about how much they donate to make their wish come true! Among the € coins, there are six coins of €2 and seven of €1, while one British coin only reaches 50 pence and another one 20 pence, the 121 others being under or equal to 10 pence.

The coins themselves deliver a lot of information about the cultures issuing them. US coins (and banknotes) pay tribute to former presidents—Lincoln, Jefferson, FDR, Washington on pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters respectively. This was not always the case: before Lincoln, US pennies depicted an Indian head until 1909; an Indian head and a buffalo illustrated the nickels until 1938, a Liberty head on the dimes until 1945, and a standing Liberty on quarters up to 1930. European coins display a very different pattern on their obverses—the side that retains national characteristics as reverses are common to all member-states. European monarchies tend to depict ruling or former kings as well as coats of arms, while Republicans tend to select symbols including the French Marianne, the German eagle, the Irish Celtic harp, or the Athenian owl. They often display emblematic national monuments: the Brandenburg Gate in Germany, the Colosseum in Italy, Santiago of Compostela’s Cathedral in Spain, Saint Stephens in Austria. The conspicuous absence of former rulers in the European republics’ coinage may represent the most striking difference with US coins. Instead, cultural figures are prominent: Dante by Raphael, the Vitruvian Man by Leonardo da Vinci, the Birth of Venus by Botticelli (Italy), Miguel de Cervantes (Spain), Mozart (Austria).

Finally, the sometimes complex cultural or political history of some of these states is visible on their coins. If several countries mint bilingual coins, such as India, Israel strikes trilingual coins, with words of Hebrew, Arabic, and English while Switzerland, officially quadrilingual, settles the matter with the use of… the Latin form, Helvetia. Coins from East Asia normally display numerals that follow the most common international standard, while the higher illiteracy rate in India leads to coins showing the corresponding number of fingers of one hand pointing to the correct denomination.

Offering Coins to the Gods: an Ancient Tradition

Perhaps unknowingly, New Yorkers and visitors throwing coins into the Bryant Park fountain relate themselves to very ancient traditions. As early societies created transcendent entities ruling the world, they tended to attribute anthropomorphic characteristics to them. As such, gods and goddesses were supposed to enjoy gifts and reward their mortal benefactors by granting them some of their wishes in exchange. The
more precious the object offered, the greater the expected return. One may recall Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his own daughter Iphigenia in order to secure favorable winds for the Greek fleet heading towards Troy or Abraham about to offer his own Isaac, whose symbolic replacement by animals in both cases symbolizes a major historical shift, as offering human beings became no longer acceptable even though that very same concept survived in later Roman gladiatorial practice. Sacrifice, especially blood sacrifice was done on a massive scale in the Greco-Roman world, such that butchers tended to settle around temples in order to trade the meat surplus thereby. Long after this sacrifice began to change religious mores, these practices were rejuvenated in the 4th century CE under the reign of Julian II the Apostate as possibly celebrated by his coinage (fig. 7). Old habits are hard to break.

Besides blood, it made sense that all sorts of precious objects would please the gods, hence the frequent offering of gold and silver in manufactured or raw forms. The practice began early: foundation deposits buried under temples are known from Mesopotamian contexts. Farther to the west, and as the economies grew more monetized, coins came to play a significant role in sacred offerings as seen by a 7th-century BCE foundation deposit at the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus (fig. 8). In addition, about 800 other small finds of gold, electrum, silver, ivory, bones, amber, and glass, all offerings, were uncovered. Near the well was a military garrison inhabited by soldiers originating from the Lower Rheinland. It is likely that they identified the goddess of the well with one of their own, much like the transplanted divinities known from discoveries of votive inscriptions and coins from the source of the Seine and the thermal reservoir at Bourbonne-les-Bains in France. The practice of tossing coins to the goddess at Coventia lasted more than two centuries, ending long after the establishment of Christianity as the preferred imperial religion. One of the most interesting features of the offerings lies with the values of the coins that were donated to the goddess. They include 4 aurei, 193 silver pieces, and thousands of sesterces on top of bronze coins of lesser value. Knowing that military pay stood at 300 denarii per year after Domitian, this means that some forlorn figures were tossing in the equivalent of $20–40 to the goddess. By comparison, with the coin tossers at Bryant Park, the soldiers were a far more serious group. Offerings of similarly large denominations have been found at Bath as well at another sacred spring deep within our humanity. Before human beings built temples—and temples were often built on grounds near sacred waters—sacred wells and springs represented, alongside sacred trees, standing and megalithic stones and pillars, the most ubiquitous locations for offerings in ancient times. Such sites have been uncovered by archaeologists in many different geographic, cultural, and (pre-) historical contexts, including North and Central America, Western and Northern Europe, Greece, the Middle East, India, and elsewhere. Retrieved offerings include cloth strips, pins, stone carvings, sacrificed humans and animals, figurines, crystals, weapons, shells, metal artifacts, small pieces of food, and so forth. Again, as coin-use spread across the world, coins appear progressively as the most frequent votive item offered to the divinities and spirits. Some of the largest deposits of coin offerings found to date come from Roman Britain; this disproportionately high number of scientifically recorded sites may have something to do with the permitted use of metal detectors in England and a liberal and pragmatic legislation favorable to treasurers’ discoveries, but it also is clearly due to a convergence of Celtic and Roman traditions that favored such coin offerings in daily lives.

Coins in the Sacred Wells of Roman England

Conventia’s Well (fig. 10), a shrine on Hadrian’s Wall, for example, offers to date the largest assemblage of coins tossed for religious reasons in the Roman world; the original deposit comprised about 16,000 coins, of which about 8,000 survive, and 13,490 were catalogued.4 Mixed with the usual assemblage of animal bones, pottery shreds, bronze objects, pieces of lead, and glass, the coins cover a chronological range from the invasion campaign of 409–405 CE. Among these objects was an additional 24 early electrum coins. Yet another deposit found at the Artemision, a “pot hoard” (fig. 9), was uncovered by David Hogarth during the excavation campaign of 1934–1935. A number of these objects was additionally 24 early electrum coins. Yet another deposit found at the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus (fig. 8), the Temple of Athena Polias at Priene (2nd century BCE), among many others. Coin deposits have also been retrieved from the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus; c. 630 BCE. According to the terms of the excavation permit granted by the Turkish government, the pot came to the British Museum, while the original coins are kept in the Archaeological Museum, Istanbul. The coins on display in the British Museum are electrotype copies. Image © Trustees of the British Museum.

Bryant Park Hoard: A Bridge to Our Past

While Bryant Park is not an age-old sacred place and pilgrimage destination like Bath, those tossing their pocket change into the Platt fountain, perhaps more as a reflex than as an actual offering, still participate in an amazing long-lived tradition. And indeed, traditions over time often become mindless, with human behavior that favored such coin offerings in daily lives.


Fountains of Fortune