

GREAT COLLECTORS / COLLECTIONNEURS CÉLÈBRES

King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy

Victor Emmanuel III was born on 11 November 1869, became King on 29 July 1900 after the assassination of his father, abdicated on 9 November 1946 and died in Egypt on 28 December 1947. He was very attentive to numbers and fatal coincidences; May 9th was a very important date in his life: on May 9th 1881 Colonel Egidio Osio became his tutor and transmitted to him the passion for coins; their relationship, affectionate on both sides, is documented in over 400 letters (from 1881 to 1902) written by Victor Emmanuel, all mentioning coins, new acquisitions, books. On May 9th 1946, at the moment of leaving Italy for Egypt, Victor Emmanuel donated his coin collection to the Italian people; a collection that – as he wrote – was the greatest passion of his life: the gravity of this remark does not diminish the magnitude of the gift and the scale of the collection (over 100,000 coins, dating from the fall of the Roman Empire in the West to the Unification of Italy, issued by Italian mints, in Italy and abroad). On top of this, the King left a work as grand as the collection itself: the 20 volumes of the *Corpus Nummorum Italicorum*, which he edited personally, with the help of a number of successive numismatic secretaries. Moreover, the collection is also an enormous archive, considering that each coin has a ticket, personally handwritten by the king, recording provenance, auction or dealer with price, or name of donors (many were given to him by his family or subjects).

I told the story of the King's passion and numismatic activity in a book to which Philip Grierson wrote a very detailed foreword, commenting on the collection and the collector, and on the King's value as a scholar: in reproducing this foreword I wish to honour both the late Maestro and the numismatic King.

Lucia TRAVAINI

Philip Grierson, Foreword to Lucia Travaini, *Storia di una passione: Vittorio Emanuele III e le monete*, Salerno, Laveglia, 1991, after colophon, unpaginated, in English, pp. 5-11 in Italian; 2nd edition, Rome, Edizioni Quasar, 2005, pp. 23-29 in English, pp. 15-21 in Italian.¹

Victor Emmanuel III, king of Italy from 1900 to 1946, was one of the great coin collectors of his day, indeed of all time, and the twenty immense volumes of his *Corpus Nummorum Italicorum* give him a permanent place in the history of numismatics.

¹ We thank Edizioni Quasar, Rome, for permission to reproduce this text.

Victor Emmanuel was born at Naples in 1869 and was given his first coin in 1875, though an alternative initial date for his collection is 1879 when his Irish governess gave him a soldo of Pope Pius IX. He himself reckoned his serious collecting to have begun in 1881, when tenente colonnello Egidio Osio (1840-1902) became his tutor. Osio was a professional soldier, with a distinguished military record and some diplomatic experience, who collected coins as a hobby and saw the possibility of using them to interest his pupil in history. In 1883 the thirteen year old boy wrote for his classical tutor an essay entitled "Il mio medagliere", but the dimensions of this were modest: only 75 coins. Six years later, when Osio's tutorship ended, it had reached the much more respectable figure of 3,000.

It was then that the Prince of Naples, to use the title Victor Emmanuel bore before his accession, decided to limit his collection to coins of Italy and 'Italian' states abroad. The latter were for the most part the states of the Crusaders, which were either of Italian foundation, or copied Italian coins, or had left behind titular sovereignties inherited or acquired by the house of Savoy. By 1891 the prince had 6,000 coins and had given much thought to their best organization. By 1894, when he took up residence at Florence, the figure had doubled, and by 1897, when he moved back to Naples, it had trebled. When he became king in 1900, after the assassination of his father, Umberto I, he had 27,000 coins, and the following year his holdings more than doubled by the acquisition of the largest private collection in the country, the 33,000 coins that had belonged to the recently deceased Marchese Marignoli.

Apart from occasional spectacular acquisitions any further growth of the collection had virtually to be limited to varieties, whether real, fabricated, or imaginary. It in any case continued. In 1936 the king put its total size at 88,000 coins, and on 1 April 1940 it ran to 103,846. Its safe-keeping during the war raised problems, for the king naturally feared its destruction in some air raid. In the winter of 1942/3 it was packed into 23 large cases and removed from Rome to Piedmont, where it was deposited in his country house at Pollenzo. After the fall of Mussolini the collection was seized by the Germans and carried off to Bavaria. Mussolini after his release secured its return by a personal appeal to Hitler but it continued to be moved from place to place, to Cuneo, Valdieri, and Monza, being eventually seized again by the Germans and its removal only stopped at Bolzano. After the Allied victory prince Umberto effected its return to the Quirinale, and his father, before going into exile,



King Victor Emmanuel III

transferred it by gift to the Italian people save for the coins of the house of Savoy, which accompanied him to Egypt. The main part of it had survived the war unharmed, though two of the cases were at some stage tampered with and a number of coins stolen. They have never been found, but the rest of the collection, including the coins of the house of Savoy, which in accordance with Umberto's last wishes joined the others in 1983, are now preserved in the Museo Nazionale Romano at Rome. Part of the King's numismatic library, however, went to Pietro Oddo and was acquired from him by the Fondazione Mormino of the Banco di Sicilia at Palermo.

With a collection of over 100,000 coins Victor Emmanuel has a good claim to rank as one of the greatest coin collectors in history. If he differs from most collectors in being a sovereign, he does so in two other respects of perhaps greater interest to numismatists. One is that his position encouraged the preservation of records that make it possible to trace, more fully than is normally the case with collectors, how the collection was formed. The other lies in the use he made of it. Numismatists who are themselves collectors have often made their own collections the basis of scholarly publications, but no other collections have been at once so large and so specialized as to provide the basis for a survey of the coinage of an entire country throughout its history since the fall of Rome.

The documentation for this growth, which provides the material for much of this volume by Lucia Travaini Colvin, comes in large measure from the diary of Victor Emmanuel's tutor Egidio Osio and the prince's letters to him, especially those written in the thirteen years between his retirement as tutor in 1889 and his death in 1902. The letters, especially those written by Victor Emmanuel on his travels, are full of fascinating information on the collections and coins he has seen or managed to acquire. They convey a vivid impression of his passion for the subject and of the remarkable extent of his knowledge. They are also a touching testimony to the depth of affection that existed between the two correspondents, and do much to contradict the widespread view of the king as egocentric, and cold and unfeeling in personal relations. After they come to an end we are much less well-informed, but a group of letters between the king and cavaliere Enrico Linger, one of his secretaries at the Quirinale, and printed as an appendix by Lucia Travaini, provide some information on the eight years 1926-34. This throws light on the king's relations with dealers and scholars, but by that time the collection had been effectively 'made' and as a whole the letters are less informative than the correspondence with Osio.

We know, therefore, something of how the collection was built up, though we never learn much about the individual coins or hoards that were bought by Victor Emmanuel or on occasion presented to him. It is only from 1896 onwards that provenances were recorded on his coin tickets. How the collection came to be published is also clear, though often one would like to know more.

When the Società Italiana di Numismatica was founded at Milan in 1892, one of the objects it had in mind was the compilation of a comprehensive work on Italian



The 20 volumes of *Corpus Nummorum Italicorum* in a cabinet made to be donated by the King (Asta Varesi, 19 March 2003, no. L 1924).

coinage. In 1897 the prince of Naples attended a meeting of the society, of which he had been an honorary member since its foundation, and announced his intention of undertaking such a project himself. The work would be based on his own now gigantic collection, but where necessary would include material from elsewhere. The secretary of the society, Costantino Luppi, entered the king's employment to organize the project and was the first of a series of numismatic secretaries – Luppi down to his death in 1899, Giuseppe Ruggero from 1899 to 1911, Alberto Cunietti-Cunietti-Gonnet from 1911 to 1939, and Pietro Oddo from 1940 onwards – who were responsible for the king's numismatic correspondence and for seeing successive volumes of the *Corpus* through the press. The increased public engagements that faced the king after his accession to the throne in 1900, and the immense task of incorporating Marignoli's collection with that of the king, imposed unavoidable delays. Complicated decisions had to be made over the printing and on copyright

problems. The first volume, devoted to the coins of the house of Savoy, consequently did not appear till 1910. The next four volumes, however, were by then nearly ready and appeared at yearly intervals between 1911 and 1914. The sixth volume – *Veneto: Zecche minori* – was delayed until 1922 because of uncertainties over the future Italian frontier in the north-east during World War I, so that vols. VII (1915) and VIII (1917) appeared out of chronological order. The remaining volumes were published at intervals over the decades 1919-1939, down to vol. XIX. Vol. XX, covering the mint of Naples from the accession of Philip II onwards, was finished in 1943, but few copies were printed and still fewer distributed. The final volumes, intended to cover Sicily, the Crusader States, and the short-lived Italian Empire of modern times, were never completed at all.

The *Corpus* represents an immense publishing achievement, though every user is as conscious of its defects as of its merits. It places at his disposal an immense body of material, and the coin descriptions are in general clear and accurate. But the arrangement of the coins is often maddening. The user is virtually never given any assistance in extending his knowledge further, for references are virtually non-existent. The volumes have no tables of contents, the page headings are uniformly unhelpful, the indices are perfunctory, the large format is inconvenient. One could easily continue the list of complaints. They inevitably raise the question of whether the author, who was effectively Victor Emmanuel himself and not those who assisted him over the years, was a good numismatist at all.

Here one must make a distinction. That Victor Emmanuel was a great collector is undeniable. It has been said that to become a great collector one requires three qualities: interest, knowledge, and means. Victor Emmanuel's possession of the first and third of these is evident. He was by temperament a collector, and under Osio's guidance his collecting aptitudes were directed towards coins instead of towards butterflies or geological specimens, or towards postage stamps, like his contemporary George V of Great Britain. A dislike of classical studies from his childhood onwards, combined with his position as heir to the Italian throne and eventually king, steered him away from Greek or Roman coins and led to his concentration on Italian ones. He had ample though not unlimited funds for acquisitions, and so far as we can judge he made these sensibly, paying fair prices but refusing to be held to ransom by excessive demands. The reputation for meanness that he had in some numismatic circles, and which was based in part in his refusal to comply with unreasonable demands for free copies of the *Corpus*, are quite undeserved; he was always generous in imparting information and supplying casts to other collectors and scholars.

He also had knowledge. His own coins he knew intimately, if only because they were being constantly arranged and rearranged. He took pains on his travels to see the coin cabinets of the countries he visited, and his comments on their merits and defects are always to the point. The Hague had virtually no Italian coins; the vast

collection at St Petersburg was in total disorder; that of the British Museum was extremely rich but badly arranged. He had a retentive memory and seems to have had the literature on Italian coinage at his fingertips. Again and again, in reading his correspondence, one is impressed by his ability to identify coins he sees for the first time and place them in their correct historical setting.

Victor Emmanuel had therefore all the qualities that make a great collector. But was he also a great numismatist? The answer, I think, must be in the negative.

The problem of how best to arrange the diverse coinages of the Italian peninsula was one that had preoccupied scholars since the eighteenth century. It had been discussed at length by collectors and dealers, as for instance by F.P. Tonini in his *Topografia generale delle zecche italiane* (1869), as well as by more accredited numismatists like Papadopoli and Sambon, and it was one to which Victor Emmanuel devoted much attention. He rightly discarded the alphabetical mint arrangement of Vincenzo Promis' *Tavole sinottiche* (1869) and Bazzi and Santoni's *Vade-Mecum* (1886), his annotated copy of the latter being preserved at Rome. He finally adopted, for all coinages save those of Savoy, a regional arrangement which has in the main stood the test of time. But within his regions the arrangement remained alphabetical under mints, though one under minting authorities would have been preferable, and it would have been better to have treated the early coinage in broad categories and in a mainly chronological order, as Sambon was to do in his *Repertorio*. The king's critics were here certainly in the right. Moreover, within each mint, the order of the coins is often chaotic.

Victor Emmanuel's correspondence shows that he was often aware that no satisfactory study existed of particular coinages: a letter to Osio of 12.xii.1896 notes the absence of any for the Senatorial grossi of Rome and the grossi of Pisa. He obviously could not have been expected to remedy these deficiencies himself. Even if he had had the inclination he could never have found the time. But he never seems to have considered the possibility of using his position to encourage other numismatists to undertake the necessary researches, and in his catalogue arrangement he simply reproduces the currently accepted naming of denominations and attributions to rulers and mints, without ever warning his readers that these may be open to question and in need of revision. It is true that if he had stopped to consider every detail the work would never have been completed, and scholars would not now have, as they have had for the last half century, the great mass of material that he put at their disposal. But something short of a thorough-going revision could easily have been undertaken, and the ensuing boon to scholars would have been immense. It is something which a true numismatist, as distinct from a collector, would have done, and indeed could not have resisted doing.

Whatever reservations one may make over the *Corpus*, however, all students of Italian coinage and of the history of numismatics must be profoundly grateful to

Lucia Travaini for having written a book that throws so much light on Victor Emmanuel's numismatic interests, and on the conditions of coin collecting in Italy in the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. I believe they will find her book as fascinating reading as I have myself.

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