

Rudi Thomsen (21.07.1918 - 29.03.2004)



Rudi Thomsen came from humble origins in the small Danish town Randers, thirty kilometers north of Aarhus. He was born in 1918 as son of a paper-hanger, who could not afford – nor even dream of – to give his two sons a higher education. An anonymous group of donors, however, became aware of the bright young man and raised money to finance his studies at the newly founded university of Aarhus, where he undertook History, Greek Culture, and Latin in 1936. His main teachers in History were the mediaevalist Johan Plesner (who prematurely died in 1938) and the ancient historian Adam Afzelius, and he was taught classical culture and philology by the energetic Franz Blatt. He had a longer stay at the Swedish Institute in Rome in 1940-42, and then graduated with honors in 1944. Three years later he defended his “Habilitationsschrift”, *The Italic Regions from Augustus to the Lombard Invasion* (reprinted in Italy in 1966), which he piously dedicated to his anonymous benefactors. The same year he married Else, from whom he had two children, and with whom he spent the rest of his life.

In 1949 Rudi Thomsen became assistant curator at the Coin Cabinet in Copenhagen. Georg Galster, the keeper, was much feared for his tyrannical manners, but the young doctor Thomsen was not intimidated and soon impressed Galster with his profound and thorough knowledge of ancient coinage, of which he was in charge. His interest was soon caught in the ongoing and lively discussion on the introduction of the denarius, set off by Mattingly and Robinson, who in 1932 had argued for a date of 187 BC instead of the traditional one of 269 BC, vehemently defended by Signore Breglia and Cesano. At the International Numismatic Congress in Paris in 1953, Rudi Thomsen stunned the numismatic world by outlining a totally different system with 210 BC – “or possibly a few years before” – as the date for the introduction of the denarius.

Not everyone was immediately convinced, but when Thomsen published volume I of *Early Roman Coinage* in 1957, every bit of relevant evidence: literary, numismatic as well as archaeological, was laid out, and the publication of volumes II-III in 1961, made it even more clear that the “ipotesi di Thomsen” was based on solid arguments and discussion. Not only the history of Roman numismatics, but that of the Roman Republic as well had to be rewritten. Rudi Thomsen acquired international fame and deservedly became honorary member of the International Numismatic Commission.

In the meantime, however, he had left the Coin Cabinet in Copenhagen in 1957 to become professor of ancient history at the University of Aarhus. He devoted most of his time and energy to his teaching, which combined inspiring enthusiasm and clear instructions, with rigorous standards for profound knowledge and solid arguments. To this purpose, he led joined excursions to Egypt, Greece, and Italy, which many of his former students still remember with great pleasure. Administrative responsibilities were added, especially from 1972, when he was elected – and several times re-elected – head of the History Department, in accordance with the University’s new statutes. His efficient leadership is the main reason for the Department’s survival in the troublesome 70s.

Thomsen also spent much time and energy as editor – and often himself as author – of several textbooks on historical subjects of all periods, as well as of a dictionary of history for the general Danish reader. Still he continued his research. His *Eisphora. A Study of Direct Taxation in Ancient Athens*, in 1964, and *The Origin of Ostracism*, in 1972, were received less favourably by reviewers, but there can hardly be any doubt that *King Servius Tullus*, from 1980, will remain a standard work of reference for many years, due to its exhaustive discussion of every ancient and modern source of evidence. He then turned his interest to the history of ancient China.

After his retirement in 1986 he continued to write books, all in Danish and intended for the general public. Most remarkable is *Oldtidens penge* (“Coinage of the Ancient World”) in 1994, where he demonstrated his expertise of the latest scholarly debate on the beginning of ancient coinage. He had many plans for further books, even during the last months of his life, when his unrelenting energy began to fade away.

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