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David Shotter

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GODS, EMPERORS, AND COINS

By DAVID SHOTTER

References to coins in the text:

1. *RIC*: H. Mattingly, E. A. Sydenham, and C. H. V. Sutherland (edd.), *The Roman Imperial Coinage* (London, 1923)
Vol. 1 – Augustus to Vitellius
Vol. 2 – Vespasian to Hadrian
Vol. 3 – Antoninus to Commodus
Vol. 4 – Pertinax to Uranius Antoninus
Vol. 5 – Valerian to Diocletian
Vol. 6 – Diocletian to Maximinus
Vol. 7 – Constantine to Licinius
(Vol. 8 – Not yet published)
Vol. 9 – Valentinian I to Theodosius I
2. *LRBC*: P. V. Hill, R. A. G. Carson, and J. P. C. Kent, *Late Roman Bronze Coinage, A.D. 324–498* (London, 1960)

It is a commonplace that Roman religion was less concerned with the spiritual well-being than with the political success of the *nobiles*.¹ The gods were the symbols and guarantors of varying aspects of Roman power; keeping them content was of paramount importance, and it was the *nobiles* who were in general credited with the ability to ensure the continuation of this state of affairs.

From the earliest introduction of true coinage in Rome around 300 B.C.,² portrayals of gods had regularly been used to advertise to the people of Italy the growing power of Rome; religious types continued to feature on coins through to the eventual fall of the Western Empire.

Octavian's victory at Actium brought a centralized monarchic style of government, which meant both more control over the minting of coins and that the state religion was by definition one of the 'weapons' at the new government's disposal. Under the emperors, therefore, coins and religion could come together to enhance the rulers' *auctoritas*, a process already firmly adumbrated in Julius Caesar's coins commemorating his divine ancestress, Venus Genetrix, and given a particular justification in the emperors' exercising an especial responsibility for the state's religion through the chief pontificate, repeatedly emphasized by the appearance of PONT MAX or P M in the imperial titulary, a title held by all emperors until discarded by Gratian in the late fourth century as a manifestation of paganism.

The theory that lay behind the restoration of the Republic brought with it a close identification of the interests of the *princeps* and the *respublica*; the gods' protection of the *princeps* was therefore a matter for general advertisement. Thus Augustus' escape from lightning during the Cantabrian expedition of 22 B.C. (Suet. *Aug.* 29) led not only to the dedication of a temple to Jupiter Tonans (Dio 54.4.2), but also to the issue of coins at Caesaraugusta (Saragossa) commemorating both the temple and the god (*RIC* (Augustus), 276–8). The state religion became increasingly intertwined with the imperial personage through the imperial cult, an institution which in the true tradition of the state's cults mixed religion firmly with politics, as is seen early on in the commemoration of the Lyons altar to ROMA ET AVGVSTVS (*RIC* (Augustus), 359 ff.; (Tiberius), 11 ff.). Living emperors claimed respectability for their regimes through emphasizing religious links with their dead predecessors—*pietas* in fact. Thus Augustus issued for DIVVS IVLIVS (*RIC* (Augustus), 271), Tiberius for DIVVS AVGVSTVS PATER (*RIC* (Div. Aug. Pat.), 1 ff.), and Nerva for DIVVS AVGVSTVS (*RIC* (Nerva), 126 ff.). A similar purpose is proclaimed in CONSECRATIO issues, such as M. Aurelius' for Antoninus Pius (*RIC* (Marcus), 429 ff.), Commodus' for M. Aurelius (*RIC* (Commodus), 264 ff.), Quintillus' for Claudius Gothicus (*RIC* (Claudius Gothicus), 256 ff.), and in the fourth century by Constantine's sons' issues of DIV CONSTANTINVS PT AVGG (Pater Augustorum: *LRBC* I.206).

In a similar way, the divinely inspired unity of the imperial family was stressed through coins issued for members of the emperor's family: for example, Caligula's coin depicting his three sisters personified as Securitas, Concordia, and Fortuna (*RIC* (Caligula), 26), or Trajan's for his dead father and sister (*RIC* (Trajan), 762 ff.; 748 ff.), or the commemoration of the two deified Faustinas in the Antonine period. Such practices contrast sharply with Tiberius' pronouncement on the position of Livia (*Tac. An.* 1.14.3) but illustrate the growing tendency for emperors to see themselves and their families as set apart from the rest of humanity—as is evidenced also in Caligula's remarks to Macro as reported by Philo (*Leg.* 41 ff.).

The growing equivocation of attitude is well reflected in the coinage. Although Tiberius had firmly rejected the notion of a divine element to the living emperor with his statesmanlike observation that his services to Rome would be his temples (*An.* 4.38. 1–3), others clearly felt that the help of the gods (and more) was not to be lightly spurned. Nero illustrates well the advantages to

be gained and the fact—important also, as we shall see for the early Christian emperors—that religious coin types were capable of interpretation at various levels. This was important since, after all, the recipients of the propaganda, the Empire's subjects, could in no way be described as uniform in their attitudes to their emperor's divinity.

B. H. Warmington³ has noted the growing ambiguity of Nero's coinage: in the later years of the reign—the coins are not precisely dated—Nero issued a series of *aurei* and *denarii* (*RIC* (Nero), 41 ff.), showing himself as was usual on the obverse, and with a variety of reverse types. Two show Nero wearing a radiate sun-crown; although radiate obverses were to come to carry no more sinister an implication than an indication of double value (for example, the *dupondius* as a double *as*, and the *antoninianus* as a double *denarius*), its significance at this early stage must surely be taken as indicating presumed divinity.

Another type in the series has IVPPITER CVSTOS⁴ on the reverse; this plainly could be (and was presumably intended to be) interpreted on various levels. Straightforwardly it was simply a commemoration of Rome's guardian deity; on a second level it would suggest that Jupiter's especial protective custody was extended towards the emperor who had recently escaped from the 'plot' engineered by his mother (*An.* 14. 10–11). On a third and more tendentious level, the type might be intended to suggest an identification between Nero and Jupiter—the heavenly guardian and his earthly counterpart; this might itself provide an indication of Nero's changing notion of the monarchy's character—in the direction of a Hellenistic god-monarchy. Perhaps indicative of a similar trend—though more disturbing because it will have seemed more flippant—was the *aes* type depicting the lyre-playing Apollo (*RIC* (Nero), 349 ff.); we are left in no doubt as to what Nero intended by this by Tacitus' observations on the emperor's presumed proximity to Apollo (*An.* 14.14.2).

How far an emperor developed such trends was of course largely a matter of character and judgement as to what was politically expedient: many emperors demonstrated the private protection they claimed to receive from particular deities; Domitian certainly advertised the protection he claimed to receive from Minerva in much the same way as Augustus had advertised his relationship with Apollo on the *Ara Pacis*.⁵

Such types as Domitian's commemoration of Minerva cannot be regarded as indicating any extraordinary claim on the emperor's part; there is no sign on his coins, just as there is not on Caligula's,

of the divine honours both emperors are said to have claimed. There is little doubt, however, as we have seen in Nero's case, that the dividing line between the claiming of divine protection and the apparent assumption of supra-human attributes could be a narrow one. For example, that Commodus had an interest in popular religions can hardly be doubted; his coinage extends in its references beyond the traditional deities to embrace Hercules (the especial patron of Commodus), Cybele, Serapis, and Sol. Indeed it has been suggested⁶ on the basis of the commemoration of Jupiter Exsuperator (*RIC* (Commodus), 483) that Commodus may have been trying to create a world-religious system with Jupiter at its head. As Grant notes, such a high-minded conception is at variance with the literary tradition of religious exoticism on the emperor's part. That the literary sources are nearer the truth, however, seems to be evinced by the emperor's developing relationship with Hercules—from appearing as the emperor's patron on the coins of A.D. 183 to being claimed as Commodus' special protector (*HERC COMMODIANO*) in A.D. 190 to what is virtually an identification (*HERCVLI ROMANO AVG*) in the final year of the reign.

Hercules had of course a particular propriety for a Roman emperor—the one who laboured and suffered for his fellow-men, who at the end reaped the reward of translation to divinity; Commodus was not the first to recognize the suitability; we might well wonder what Trajan intended to suggest when he represented the Column, itself the record of the Dacian victories, as the club of Hercules (*RIC* (Trajan), 581).

The religious life of the Empire's subjects had always been varied; the effect of the communications network, larger-scale citizenship grants, and in particular the multifarious background of the Roman army was to spread these various religious practices more widely, and, of course, to facilitate their appearance in the very highest ranks of Roman society. Emperors and their families were themselves frequently devotees of cults whose origins were far from Rome and Italy, and which had sometimes in the past themselves been the subjects of outlawry—for example, the Egyptian cults which had been attacked by Tiberius as subversive (*An.* 2.85).

On occasions such cults were in effect harnessed to the imperial cult; such we may take as the significance of the building of a cult centre to Cybele, the Great Mother, at the Saalburg in the Antonine period; coins display the interest of members of the Antonine family in the cult (*RIC* (Marcus), 704). Similarly, the interest of the Severan emperors in the Egyptian mysteries, evidenced on the

coinage, would appear to be the explanation of the dedication at York, apparently in the first decade of the third century, of a temple to Serapis (*RIB* 658).

The coinage shows that in the main emperors' own personal religious interests were advertised alongside the more traditional deities of Rome. Where the emphasis lay was much a matter of taste, and contrasts in this direction are best seen in the coinage of Elagabalus and his successor, Severus Alexander. Elagabalus, whose name indeed derives from the Sun-god of Emesa whose high-priest the emperor was, has left in the literary record nothing but a testament to religious depravity: 'Serious statesmanship and the machinery of government seem to have been suspended while the Roman world looked on, shamed and disgusted, at the exhibition of lust, cruelty and fanatical madness instigated by the priest-emperor.'⁸ Many types display the ceremonial of the god of which the most striking is *SANCT DEO SOLI ELAGABAL* (*RIC* (Elagabalus), 143); indeed it has been thought that some idea of Sol's place in the divine hierarchy as propounded by Elagabalus is to be found in the *SOLI PROPVGNATORI* type (*RIC* 198), on which Sol is depicted with the thunderbolt, the traditional attribute of Jupiter.

The frequency with which Sol appears on the reverse of Alexander's coins can leave us in no doubt that he too was a devotee of the sun, perhaps in a more orthodox way through Mithraism. None the less, the literary record, which sees Alexander as the antithesis to Elagabalus and the restorer of much that was traditional in Roman life, has its counterpart in the numismatic evidence—in no way perhaps more strikingly than in the return to Jupiter of his thunderbolt on the type *IOVI PROPVGNATORI* (*RIC* (Alexander), 234). Alexander had thus returned on his coins to a philosophy long established on the coinage—namely in pitching his appeal as widely as possible and recognizing that little was gained by causing gratuitous offence to influential sections of the community. Thus, as with Nero's *IVPPITER CVSTOS*, Alexander's coins will have provided the opportunity for contemporary interpretation on wide basis; and the traditional elements in them will undoubtedly have formed the foundation for his alleged very pro-senatorial appeal (Herodian, 6.1.2).


The middle decades of the third century were a period of military, political, and economic chaos, with the western provinces breaking away between 260 and 273 in the *Imperium Galliarum*. It is thus predictable that religious elements on the coins would have to perform a number of functions—to appeal to

national, local, and (perhaps most important) military interests, and to project emperors as worthy leaders. In this latter connection the stressing of the cult of Hercules is to be expected: Gallienus, for example, issued a striking *aureus* depicting himself on the obverse with the lion-skin head-dress (*RIC* (Gallienus, sole reign), 447). His rival on the Rhine, Postumus, issued types commemorating most of the traditional gods, but especially Hercules: indeed, Postumus' mint at Cologne issued a quite unique series of coins each depicting one of the twelve labours. The rebel emperor also publicized on his coins certain of Hercules' cult centres in Germany. Eastern cults also appear: Sol was depicted on issues with such legends as *ORIENS AVG* and *INVICTVS*, and particularly interesting is the commemoration of Serapis on Postumus' coinage—not only because the Egyptian cults will beyond doubt have had followers in the Rhine legions, but also because Tacitus (*Germ.* 9.2) tells us of the early influence of Isis amongst the German tribes. Most of these gods, traditional and otherwise, are claimed by Postumus as his companions (*comites*) or guardians (*conservatores*); and one reference to Minerva as partisan (*fautrix*) is particularly unusual (*RIC* (Postumus), 210).


The tone of such issues is perfectly 'respectable'; no elaborate claims are made; rather it is once more a case of pitching the coins' appeal as widely as possible in a potentially unstable political atmosphere. The Gallo-German rebellion was ended by Aurelian, for whom Sol was a principal deity: indeed as his reign progresses we can detect a squeezing out of the more traditional gods who had been honoured early in the reign—for example, on the type with the legend *IOVI CONSER* and showing Aurelian receiving the globe from Jupiter (*RIC* (Aurelian), 48)—in favour of *SOL INVICTVS*: it is perhaps not without interest that one mint (Serdica in Asia) incorporated *INVICTVS* into the emperor's titles on the obverse.

The imperial coinage up to the late third century therefore shows clearly that, with a few notable exceptions, Roman emperors saw religion as a weapon in the armoury of the politician, and that its use might take two forms—either an attempt to impress by virtually unequivocal assumption of divine attributes by emperors, or the issuing of a broadly based appeal which would create confidence without causing offence, but which would give the means to the recipient to interpret as he wished.

The principle is a vitally important one when we come to consider the coinage of the fourth century—of Constantine and his successors. A great deal of attention has been paid to the nature

and possible explanation of Constantine's 'vision' before the battle of the Milvian Bridge which brought about the defeat of Maxentius.⁹ Even more discussed is the question of what Constantine *thought* he saw; it is, however, evident that Constantine himself said little about the incident except later and then only to close intimates.¹⁰ The immediate and tangible sign of the experience was the painting of  on his soldiers' shields.

It has frequently been observed¹¹ that the short-term effect of Constantine's victory on the coinage is minimal; not only do we look in vain for anything of a distinctively Christian significance, but there is only the most sparing of allusion to the sign of the vision itself, however the emperor interpreted it. For nearly a decade after the Milvian Bridge the coin issues proclaimed the power of Jupiter, Mars, Hercules, and Sol; the evidence shows in fact that apart from acting against sacrifice Constantine was virtually encouraging his subjects to keep to their traditional faiths.¹² His recognition of the traditional deities, however, ceased as an integral part of his 'crusade' against Licinius: for around 320 the mints in Constantine's half of the Empire went over to the issue of the unique type BEATA TRANQVILLITAS, whilst those in the East continued to parade Jupiter Conservator, whom Licinius evidently identified with the Holy God under whose aegis he and Constantine had gained power. If Licinius had turned against Christians, however, it was probably largely due to the political esteem in which he felt they held his rival.

Given the nature that the conflict between the rivals assumed, we might expect that Constantine's victory in 324 would have resulted in a 'public statement' on the coinage of the triumph of the true God; instead the major statement is far more equivocal—a type with the legend SPES PVBLIC showing the Constantinian victory standard (*labarum*), tipped by , piercing a serpent (*LRBC* I.978). It would, of course, be perfectly feasible for this coin to be interpreted with a strong implication of Constantine as the minister of God, representing the victory of Christianity. On the other hand the coin need not be taken thus; the serpent was a universal symbol of evil, and it could therefore be interpreted on a purely political level. In other words, the coin has the same breadth of appeal and capability of dual interpretation as a great deal of earlier religious issues. Constantine had reunited the Empire under his control; the maintenance of the unity would depend upon appealing widely and avoiding offence. Nothing indeed in the last set of Constantinian coins (A.D. 330–7) would disturb this *status quo*—with the main types being GLORIA EXERCITVS, Victory on a prow, she-

wolf and twins. The only element with a possible Christian significance is the appearance of χ in some of the issue marks of GLORIA EXERCITVS—that is in a totally subsidiary role. Constantine's death in 337 led to further reminders of traditional reactions—DIV(VS) CONSTANTINVS and PIETAS ROMANA. His sons, Constans and Constantius II, continued in the same widely appealing manner; VICTORIAE D D AVGG Q N N, showing two facing Victories, echoed a very traditional theme, unless we may begin to read into *Victoria* the parallel with an angel of God. The same two emperors also presided over Rome's 1,100th anniversary in 348; the occasion called forth a new issue, FEL TEMP REPARATIO ('Happy Days are here again!') which did not advance the public cause of Christianity any further than the appearance of χ -tipped standards on some types. The occasion was perhaps not of a type to foster divisions; indeed other evidence suggests that a deliberate attempt was made in this direction, for Constantius is recorded¹³ as having accorded respect to the pagan temples; the implication is clearly that those for whom the temples retained their significance were both numerous and influential.

The House of Constantine was sharply disturbed by the return of rebellion in 350; the rebels, Magnentius and Vetricano, produced on their coins the most unequivocal statements thus far of a Christian nature: Magnentius' SALVS issue (LRBC II.19) features χ flanked by α and ω as the chief design; never before had such symbols achieved this degree of prominence. Vetricano, for his part, with HOC SIGNO VICTOR ERIS (LRBC II.1166) directly recalled the vision and the victory at the Milvian Bridge. The rebel status of the issuers is surely not accidental; for they rest their claim to replace the House of Constantine by a direct recall of the Milvian Bridge and consequently the implication that *they* have greater cause to be treated as the political descendants of Constantine: as such the issues have exactly the same purpose as the DIVVS AVGVSTVS coins of the first century A.D. It is also likely that types with such direct statements represent a determined attempt to secure the support of the Church's now impressive and influential organization.

In strong contrast to the apparent reluctance of the Christian emperors to advertise their beliefs on the coinage stands Julian the Apostate: his distaste of the Church and its organization manifested itself in his striking SECVRITAS REIPVB type (LRBC II.1257), a coin struck on a large flan and showing a bull, one of the most potent symbols of paganism. Although his reaction was short-lived, the strength of the feeling to which he was appealing

and the influence of the people who shared his feeling are demonstrated in the production at the Rome mint, probably in the reign of Valentinian and presumably with the connivance or at the instigation of a senior mint-official, of unofficial Isis-'coins' for distribution to the faithful.¹⁴

With Valentinian we return to the muted allusions to Christianity which had characterized the Constantinian period. In GLORIA ROMANORVM (LRBC II.479) we again see an emperor holding a χ -tipped standard and dragging a captive; the contemporary issue, SECVRITAS REIPVBLICAE (LRBC II.477), has the winged Victory. The sensitive role of *Victoria* is made very clear by Symmachus in his account of the attitudes of various emperors to the Altar of Victory in the Senate house. *Victoria* symbolized Rome's centuries of success, and some Christian emperors found it politic not to act towards it as the logic of their faith might dictate. The fact that it meant so much to pagans was a strong incentive to emperors to find a way in which *Victoria* could be reconciled with Christian symbolism. In general, however, the later fourth-century emperors were less inclined towards compromise with paganism. Thus from the 380s Christian statements on the coinage became less equivocal, and the symbolism (including the Christianized *Victoria*) become bolder. An example of this is to be found in the obverse of Arcadius which shows the emperor's head with a wreath being placed upon it from above; the proffering of the wreath suggests *Victoria*, whilst the circumstances suggest divine agency.

Theodosius' decisive break with paganism seems finally to have 'emancipated' the coinage: the cross within a wreath appears as the main feature of a type of Honorius, whilst Galla Placidia has a winged victory bearing a cross. Such overt Christian symbolism continues into the fifth century, ironically reaching its zenith at virtually the moment of Rome's fall, with Olybrius' type showing a cross within the legend SALVS MVNDI.

Thus apart from the post-Theodosian issues the coinage of 'Christian' Rome had continued the general practice of its predecessors—to appeal widely by allowing the recipient to make his own interpretation; *mos maiorum* was as potent a slogan at the end as ever it had been.

NOTES

1. Cic. *De Nat. Deor.* 3.87; R. M. Ogilvie, *The Romans and their Gods* (London, 1969), p. 17.
2. See C. H. V. Sutherland, *Roman Coins* (London, 1974), pp. 13 ff.
3. B. H. Warmington, *Nero: Reality and Legend* (London, 1969), p. 121.

4. C. H. V. Sutherland, *Coinage in Roman Imperial Policy, 31 B.C.—A.D. 68* (London, 1951), p. 172.
5. E. Simon, *Ara Pacis Augustae* (Tübingen, 1967), p. 12 and plate 5, 1.
6. M. Grant, *Roman History from Coins* (Cambridge, 1958), p. 70.
7. On the popularity of the cult at Rome, see Ogilvie, *op. cit.*, pp. 92–3.
8. H. Mattingly, E. A. Sydenham, and C. H. V. Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage* (London, 1962), Vol. IV², p. 23.
9. A. H. M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (London, 1972), pp. 85–105.
10. Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 98 f. The relevant texts are Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 1.26, and Lactantius, *De Mort. Pers.* 44.5.
11. P. Bruun, 'The Christian signs on the coins of Constantine', *Arctos* 3 (1956), 5–35. A bibliography on the subject is given by Bruun in his introduction to *RIC* 7 (1966), xxix f.
12. e.g. *Cod. Theod.* 16.2.5; 9.16. 1–2; 16.10.1.
13. Symmachus, *Rel.* 3.6.
14. A. Alföldi, *A Festival of Isis at Rome* (Budapest, 1937); *RIC* 9 (1933), xxix and 108.