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Coins and early Christian history

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I would like to take a broad brush and outline some of the ways that coins might help us understand the rise of Christianity. The progress of early Christianity was amazing, from a small group of followers who fled when Jesus Christ was crucified c.30 CE, to be the dominant religion of the Roman Empire by the end of the 4th century. Surprisingly, the coins of the period tell us a lot about various aspects of this development.

The cult of the hero was a major competitor with Christianity in the first few centuries. Perseus, one of the popular heroes of this cult, is shown on coins mostly from the eastern part of the Empire. According to David Ulansey¹, Perseus then became Mithras in a new religion that developed at Tarsus c.100 BCE as a result of the discovery of an astronomical event, the precession of the equinoxes. The constellation of Perseus is located above Taurus, the bull, and in Mithraism this has cosmic significance. In Mithraic mythology Mithras kills the bull, and its blood has life-giving properties. Mithraism was very popular with Roman soldiers in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. At last count, 15 Mithraic temples have been found at Ostia, the port of Rome, and there were Mithraic temples all along the northern frontier of the Empire. Mithraism was a mystery religion for men only, and the name 'Mithras' does not appear on coins, but quite a lot is known about it from

archaeological excavations.² When the cult of *Sol Invictus* (the Unconquered Sun) was brought to Rome after campaigns in the East at the end of the 2nd century it was incorporated into Mithraism, and the combination *Sol Invictus* Mithras appeared in stone inscriptions. The relationship between *Sol Invictus* and Mithras is shown on a stone relief from the Mithraeum at Virunum, which is now in Austria (Fig. 1). The panels show scenes from the life of Mithras and in the centre panel the two comrades are shaking hands.

The heroes, whose cult was so important in Greco-Roman religion, were idealized men and they acted as intermediaries between human beings and the gods. Great devotion was shown to them, and a particularly popular hero was Herakles, the Roman Hercules. He appears on coins from the 5th century BCE to the 4th century CE. On a tetradrachm of Thasos, minted after 148 BCE (Fig. 2), he is called *Herakles Soter* (saviour). The Roman emperors saw the advantage of this approach and they portrayed themselves as heroes on their coins, but in the beginning we don't see the emperor titled Saviour (Latin: *Servator* or *Conservator*). Instead, the emperors were much more subtle and on their coins they showed the *corona civica*, the wreath of oak leaves awarded to a hero who saved the lives of his fellow citizens. The word 'saviour' as referring to Jesus occurs only twice in the Gospels, Luke 2:11



Figure 1. Fragment of a stone relief from the Mithraeum at Virunum. Photocopy, Fig. 32 in *The Mysteries of Mithra* by Franz Cumont, Dover, New York, 1956.



Figure 2. *Tetradrachm* of Thasos showing Herakles on the reverse. The legend reads, 'Of Herakles Saviour, of the people of Thasos.'

Gemini Auction III, lot 117.



Figure 3. *Aureus* of Maximianus Herculeus with Hercules on the reverse. The legend reads, 'To Hercules Victor'.

Gemini Auction II, lot 512.

and John 4:42. This reluctance of the Christians to use the word 'saviour' was probably because the Jews would have understood it in a political sense, and the Romans as referring to a god, especially Hercules or Jupiter, who were often given the title *Conservator* (Protector) on coins. The emperor Maximianus adopted the title 'Herculeus' on his accession in 286 CE, and the figure of Hercules appears on his gold *aurei* with the name Hercules Victor (Fig. 3). Christianity countered the cult of the hero with the idea of *Christus Victor*, that Jesus conquers evil in all its forms. Bishop Aulen, a 20th century Swedish theologian,

explains that 'in 1 John 3: 8 the purpose of the coming of Jesus is summarised thus: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." This fundamental theme dominates the viewpoint of the ancient church in regard to the meaning of the work of Christ, and the thought of Christ's struggle with, and *victory* over, the destructive powers occurs constantly in new variations ... During the Middle Ages this ancient Christian theme was more or less pushed aside.'³ Similarly, the early Christians countered the imperial title *Conservator* by labelling Jesus as *Conservator*, as in the mosaic showing Jesus



Figure 4. AE 30 of Caracalla showing Asklepios in his temple at Augusta Traiana.

Author's collection.



Figure 5. Virtus (Courage) on the reverse of a *sestertius* of Hadrian; reverse inscription: VIRT AVGV (VIRTVTI AVGVSTI, to the Courage of Augustus).

Munzen & Medaillen Auction 13, lot 656.

enthroned in the church of St Pudenziana in Rome (c. 400 CE).

There was no devil in Greco-Roman religion; the three Fates wove the tapestry of life's events. The concept of an evil being opposed to God came from Persia, and gave a new understanding of salvation. The concept spread with Christianity, and Paul informed the Ephesians that their struggle was against 'the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places' (Ephesians 6:12).

The worship of *Asklepios* (Latin: *Aesculapius*) was another important competitor with Christianity during these early centuries. He was the son of Apollo and was considered the god of medicine. He appears fairly commonly on coins and is usually shown leaning on a snake-entwined staff (Fig. 4). He was very popular and large numbers of people with medical problems travelled to his temples. To counter his popularity, Christian apologists emphasized the idea of Jesus Christ the Healer, *Christus Medicus*. In the gospels, Jesus' healing activity is prominent: many people were healed and some were even brought back to life. In 215 CE, Clement of Alexandria declared that Jesus was the healer of the world (*Christus Medicus Mundi*). Origen,

the first systematic theologian, writing about 230 CE, frequently used the term, *Christus Medicus*. Augustine (c. 400 CE) used it at least forty times in his writings and stressed that Jesus cures body and soul. The term faded out in the Middle Ages.

The emperor cult was another competitor with Christianity. All the emperors liked to advertise their heroic qualities on their coins, especially their *Virtus* or courage (Fig. 5). The personification of *Virtus* first appeared on a *denarius* of Galba in 68 CE. It then became a common type on Roman imperial coinage and it usually referred to the emperor. Other qualities of the emperor (such as *Liberalitas*) were also personified. The personification of personal attributes in this way would have nurtured in the public mind a basic concept of Christianity, that human beings have a body and a soul. To think of a quality of an individual as somehow separate from the material form of that individual must have encouraged this idea. Gregory Riley, a professor of New Testament in California, considers that 'the dualism of body and soul is the single most important foundation on which Christianity is based; indeed without it, Christianity would not exist ... To cite

Jesus' words in the Gospel of Mark, "What does it profit one to gain the whole world and lose one's soul?" (8:36).²⁴ If you give human beings a soul or a spirit it gives new meaning to life. In the ancient religions of the Middle East (excluding Egypt and Persia) people had no souls; but in Egyptian and Persian religion, as well as for the Greek philosophers (Pythagoras, Plato and others), the soul was something separate from the earthly body. But the prevailing view in the Greco-Roman world was a very material one. Riley explains that 'the writers of the Old Testament, and the vast majority of people in the Greco-Roman empire, lived in a distinctly material thought-world: for them, God (Yahweh or Zeus or Jupiter) had a body and sat on a throne on the top of the sky, a few thousand feet above us.'²⁵

Some of the personifications on Roman coins, e.g. *Iustitia* (Justice), would have encouraged the idea that evil could also be personified. Thus an image of the devil arose in the Christian imagination. Although the dualism of good and evil had come into Christianity from Zoroastrianism, Christians of the Middle Ages looked to Greek art for a suitable personification, and the goat-like god Pan (originally a benign pastoral deity) came to represent the devil (Fig. 6).

Alongside the development of the idea of Jesus the hero, we have the idea of the Christian martyr as a hero. In a sense the martyrs were not vanquished because they never renounced their allegiance to Jesus, no matter what. They might even be killed but they refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods. Their *Virtus* was witnessed by everyone in the arenas in Rome and elsewhere. Martyrs who were particularly brave became saints, holy people who

were in heaven with Jesus, who was seen as the ultimate martyr. In about 200 CE Tertullian, a Christian apologist, wrote, 'The blood of the martyrs is the seed [of the church].'²⁶ In this way, the number of Christians increased. In 300 CE Diocletian launched what is known as the Great Persecution. Large numbers of Christians in Alexandria, who refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods, were killed. A coin that illustrates the situation in Alexandria is the follis of Diocletian, minted there c. 300 CE (Fig. 7). It shows the Genius of the Roman People holding a patera, a bowl used to pour out libations to the gods. This was what the Christians of Alexandria were required to do and the coin is like a how-to-do-it picture.

But what if a hero figure was totally defeated, as happened to the Christian emperor Valens and his Roman army when they were virtually annihilated by the Goths in 378 CE? Here was a defeat without any redeeming features. The reverse of his *solidus* (Fig. 8) shows Victory crowning him, but this was blatantly false. Christians looked for a reason for the catastrophe, and in Valens' case it was not hard to find. Valens was an Arian, a follower of the heretic Arius, who taught that Jesus, the Son of God, had a beginning and was therefore not truly divine. After the defeat of Valens, Christians wanted a saviour who was both fully divine and fully human, and Arianism waned in influence. At the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE, only three years after the death of Valens, Arianism was anathematised.

Another such example is the emperor Trajan Decius, who had launched a serious persecution of the Christians in 250 CE. His coins also featured Victory on the



Figure 6. Pan on a gold *stater* from Pantikapaion.
Numismatica Ars Classica Auction 33, lot 138.



Figure 7. *Follis* of Diocletian with the Genius of the Roman people on the reverse.
Fritz Rudolf Kunker Munzenhandlung Auction 97, lot 1867.



Figure 8. *Solidus* of Valens with him being crowned by Victory on the reverse.
Numismatica Ars Classica Auction 34, 214.



Figure 9. *Antoninianus* of Valerian with him holding a globe on the reverse.
Author's collection.

reverse. He and his son Herennius Etruscus were killed in a disastrous battle against the Goths in 251 CE, the first emperor to die in battle against a foreign enemy. Yet another persecutor of Christians was Valerian, but he was captured by the Persians in 260 CE. The demise of these rulers, as broadcast to the population by the change in coinage, would have had a profound effect on the ordinary people, who were very superstitious and always looked for a cause for any event.

Trajan Decius issued a whole series of coins honouring imperial heroes of the past (Fig. 10), choosing twelve 'good' emperors from Augustus to Septimius Severus. Each emperor's radiate head appears on the obverse, with his name preceded by *DIVO* (to the divine), and on the reverse there is an eagle or an altar with the legend *CONSECRATIO* (consecration). David

Van Meter⁷ considers that these types were probably issued in conjunction with Decius' attempts to revitalize the state religion, the old Roman religion where there was a pantheon of gods with Jupiter at the head. Decius' inglorious end would have had a negative effect on the people in this regard.

On a later coin of Valerian he is holding a globe, which represents the world (Fig. 9). The world as a globe appeared frequently on Roman coins and was of great significance for early Christianity. Pythagoras (6th c. BCE) is credited with discovering that the earth was a globe. The old three-storey cosmos with the gods residing in the upper storey was no longer credible, and as a monotheistic understanding of divinity developed, the gods as material beings were replaced by God as spirit. The mediaeval church reaffirmed



Figure 10. One of the DIVO series of coins issued by Trajan Decius.

Auktionhaus H. D. Rauch Auction 74, lot 563.



Figure 11. *Follis* of Constantine with *Sol* on the reverse and the legend SOLI INVICTO COMITI.

Auktionhaus H. D. Rauch MBS 11, lot 1244.

the three-storey cosmos with an emphasis on hell as the destination of sinners.

After 312 CE the great hero was, of course, Constantine the Great (Fig. 11). In that year he won an important battle at the Milvian Bridge near Rome. Before the battle he claimed to have seen a vision in the sky and to have been converted to Christianity. He probably had some religious experience that he credited to Jesus Christ. But he continued to issue coins for another nine years that showed *Sol* crowning Constantine, *Sol* presenting Victory to Constantine, and *Sol* standing. Constantine did not abandon the sun god, nor did many Christians. A tomb mosaic found at Rome shows Jesus as the sun god riding his chariot across the sky. For many people Christianity was combined with worship of the sun. This is strikingly illustrated in a sermon by Pope Leo in about 450 CE, when he rebuked his congregation for paying homage to the sun in the East before entering St Peter's Basilica in Rome.

The legend on Constantine's coin SOLI INVICTO COMITI, literally means 'to Sol Invictus comrade'. It has always been taken to mean that the comrade or companion of the emperor was *Sol Invictus*, and to the ordinary subjects of the

emperor that is what it meant. But for devotees of *Sol Invictus Mithras* it would have had a different meaning, that the emperor was the representative of *Mithras*. If the comrade of Constantine is *Sol Invictus* the legend on the coin means that Constantine is Mithras or the representative of Mithras.

On a coin issued by Constantius II, the son of Constantine, and by the general, Vetranio (Fig. 12), the words on the reverse HOC SIGNO VICTOR ERIS are similar to those that Constantine heard before the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 CE. At the same time he apparently saw a vision, the details of which are hazy, but according to the fifth century historian, Sozomen, Constantine saw something like a cross in the sky. On the coin the emperor holds the *labarum* (the standard showing the Chi-Rho monogram of Jesus) and is being crowned by Victory. What the sentence came to mean is that if you are with Jesus you will be victorious over your enemies, i.e. *Christus Victor*. But originally the symbol on the *labarum* was not a symbol of Jesus, it was the personal sign of Constantine, and the sentence probably meant: if you are with Constantine and *Sol Invictus Mithras* you will be victorious.



Figure 12. *Centenionalis* of Vetranio with the emperor being crowned by Victory on the reverse and the legend HOC SIGNO VICTOR ERIS.

Fritz Rudolf Kunker Munzenhandlung Auction 115, lot 819.



Figure 13. AE 19 of Procopius. On the reverse a star design on a standard is balanced by a Chi-Rho monogram to the right.

Gorny & Mosch Auction 152, lot 2489.



Figure 14. AE 19 with a bust of Fausta on the obverse, and a star in a wreath on the reverse.

Triton VI Auction, lot 1090.



Figure 15. Silver token or medalet issued by Constantine I.

Numismatica Ars Classica Auction 33, lot 598.

Also of interest is the bronze coin issued by Procopius in 365 CE (Fig. 13). It shows him holding a standard, but on the standard there is a simple star design. This symbol must be connected with the cult of *Sol Invictus Mithras*, because on the coin there is a balance between the standard and the Chi-Rho monogram of Jesus. Procopius seems to be hedging his bets: he is trying to get both the Christians and the devotees of *Sol Invictus Mithras* on his side.

Constantine had issued coins with an eight-pointed star on their reverses, and his wife Fausta or his mother Helena on their obverses (Fig. 14). If the wreath with the sun symbol at the top is a symbol of *Sol Invictus*, what does the star mean? The same symbols reappear on a small silver coin or medalet probably issued at a later

date (Fig. 15). The answer to the meaning of the star lies in a mosaic on the floor of the Mithraeum of Felicissimus at Ostia. It shows the symbols of the seven grades of initiation, which correspond to the seven planets. The highest grade was the representative of Mithras and he was called *Pater* (Father). His symbols included the helmet of Mithras and the scythe, the attribute of *Kronos* (Saturn), and his star was Saturn, the outermost (highest) visible planet. Constantine would have held the highest grade, in which case his star was Saturn. Therefore the star on the reverse of Constantine's coins is probably Saturn and refers to Constantine.

The *Chi-Rho* monogram became a Christian symbol but originally it might have been a sign of Constantine. Exactly what it represented is a matter of



Figure 16. Lamp from Roman North Africa. As well as a reversed Chi-Rho there are numerous sun symbols on the lamp.

Image used with permission from Harlan J. Berk, Ltd.

conjecture. One suggestion is that because the soldiers of Constantine's western army would have known Latin but not Greek, it was a monogram of *Pax* (Peace). Another explanation is that the star is Saturn and the P extension stands for *Pater*. Alternatively, the sign was derived from a sun symbol with C (for Constantine) attached, as on a lamp from Roman North Africa (Fig. 16).

What I have been claiming is that in the first few centuries, Christianity appropriated the symbolism and the ideologies of these other religions. So we

have *Christus Victor*, *Christus Medicus*, *Christus Conservator*, and so on. When the image of Jesus first appeared on coins at the end of the 7th century, it is not surprising that he looked like *Asklepios* or *Zeus* and is radiate like the sun god. A critical time for Christianity was about 320 CE because that was when any reference to *Sol* or *Sol Invictus Mithras* disappeared from the coinage. What probably happened was that because of Constantine's megalomania and his desire to unify his empire he realised the limitations of Mithraism for his purposes. Mithraism was an exclusive mystery religion but Christianity was becoming generally popular. Better to represent Jesus than refer in cryptic language to Mithras.

Many factors influenced the development of Christianity, but it was not the writings of the theologians (who would have read them?) or even the decrees of the church councils (which were often contradictory) that were important. It was the general feeling of the people influenced by the great historical processes of the period. For the ordinary people Jesus the healer, the hero and the martyr model, was significant. In the historical processes such major events as the demise of persecutors like Trajan Decius and Valerian, the 'conversion' of Constantine, and the annihilation of the Arian Valens along with his army, played a significant role.

The coins issued by the Roman rulers in the first few centuries are often dismissed by historians as mere propaganda but, like all advertising, they were designed to meet a need felt by the people and to make an impression on them. Thus, even common types like

Hercules and *Asklepios* can tell us a lot about the aspirations of ordinary people and help us understand the history of Christianity.

Notes

1. Ulansey, David. *The origins of the Mithraic mysteries: cosmology and salvation in the ancient world*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989.
2. Mithraic temples were underground. A soldier who descended into one was identifying with his comrades who had been killed in battle and buried soon after. Deep in the earth the blood of a bull was poured over his naked body and because life was in the blood he was enabling his resurrection, and probably that of his fallen comrades, into a spiritual world among the stars. In other words Mithraea were regeneration factories for soldiers. The effect of all this on the male mind was very powerful, and if Christianity had not triumphed the Western world could well have become Mithraic. But women were important in Roman society, appearing frequently on Roman coins in the first few centuries CE, and they played a vital role in Christianity's success.

3. Aulen, Gustav. *The faith of the Christian Church*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1960, p 200.
4. Riley, Gregory J. *The river of God*, Harper Collins, New York, 2001, p 20.
5. *Ibid.*, p 155.
6. Tertullian. *Apologeticus*, 50.14.
7. Van Meter, David. *The handbook of Roman imperial coins*, Laurion Press, New York, 1991, p 232.

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