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Front cover: Scottish silver ryal of Mary and Henry, Regular issue (not to scale); from dies A19/55, weight 468.3 grains. (See article "The Silver Ryals coinage of Mary, Queen of Scots")

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A Newly Identified Antoninianus of Carausius in the Name of Diocletian

John McDonald

Abstract

An unpublished and previously unknown Antoninianus issued in Britain by the usurper Carausius in the name of Diocletian has recently been identified. Its highly unusual and interesting reverse shows the standing figures of three emperors, the rogue emperor Carausius together with Diocletian and Maximian, the two legitimate emperors of the time, accompanied by what appears to be the legend CONCORDIA AVGGG. The coin forms part of a series of coins issued by Carausius in about AD 292-293 on which he represented himself as one of a collegiate group of three emperors ruling harmoniously together rather than merely being a rebel. These coins support sparse historical evidence that a treaty may have been briefly established with Carausius after a failed attempt at an invasion of Britain by Maximian in about AD 289-290. The reverse design on this coin is not known from any other coins of the period. Its iconography is much more specific and unequivocal than usual, providing particularly clear evidence of Carausius' ambitions for a formal rapprochement with Diocletian and Maximian.

Keywords

[Carausius] [Diocletian] [Maximian] [antoninianus] [three emperors] [CONCORDIA] [AVGGG] [Britain] [treaty]

Introduction

The coin described in this article was found in early 2016 in Perth, Western Australia, in a tray of cheap coins. The dealer acquired it in Britain as part of a bulk lot and its provenance prior to that is unknown.¹ Research to date indicates that it is a previously unknown and unpublished type from an historically interesting series of coins issued in Britain in about AD 292-293 by the rebel Carausius.

1 Editor's note: The Editorial Board is working on a policy about the publishing of unprovenanced coins which potentially have been illegally exported. While we do not condone such exports, we do recognise the reality that they occur and that such coins could have been unwittingly purchased. Currently, every submitted article is assessed on its merits; if we come to the conclusion that the coins described were purchased in good faith, and have been exported by someone who did not recognise their significance, then we do not set this as an automatic bar to publishing in JNAA.

The historical background

In AD 286 the Western part of the Roman Empire was ruled by the emperor Maximian while the senior emperor Diocletian ruled the East. Each of them held the rank of Augustus and from March AD 293 onwards they would each be assisted by a deputy with the lower rank of Caesar, under an innovative new governing system that we now know as the *Tetrarchy* (rule by a group of four).

The military officer Marcus Aurelius Mausaeus Valerius Carausius² had been appointed to command a Roman fleet that patrolled the coast of Gaul and the English Channel from a base at Gesoriacum, also known as Bononia (Boulogne), tasked with suppressing seaborne Frankish and Saxon raiders.³

Carausius had not been in his naval command for long before he was accused of pocketing some confiscated booty rather than handing it over to local or Imperial authorities.^{4,5} So in AD 286 or 287 Maximian ordered his execution. Carausius somehow got word of this and decided that his only hope was to rebel, so he declared himself emperor and took his fleet across the channel to Britain^{6,7} where he won the support of the legions stationed there, deposed the Governor and set up his capital in London. He also retained control over Gesoriacum and a stretch of the Gallic coast.

For about seven years⁸ Carausius ruled Britain and successfully resisted the efforts of Maximian to unseat him. There is some evidence that Maximian attempted a cross-channel invasion of Britain in the late summer of AD 289 or perhaps in AD 290. A panegyric to him that was probably delivered in the spring or summer of AD 289 made it clear that Maximian had more or less finished building an invasion fleet.⁹ However, another panegyric delivered some two years later was still predicting future maritime success.¹⁰ Clearly no successful invasion of Britain had taken place. It must have been either repulsed or abandoned. It seems likely that, following a failed or aborted invasion, Maximian and Diocletian were forced to agree to some sort of truce with Carausius, but specific historical references to it are extremely limited and imprecise. A single sentence by Eutropius¹¹ tells us that:

2 Casey 1994, 47.

3 Eutropius, Book IX, 21.

4 Eutropius, Book IX, 21.

5 Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus*, 39. Translation Bird 1994, 43.

6 Eutropius, Book IX, 21.

7 Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus*, 39. Translation Bird 1994, 43.

8 Eutropius puts the length of Carausius' reign at 7 years (Eutropius, Book IX, 22) while Aurelius Victor puts it at 6 years (Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus*, 39). I have followed Eutropius.

9 Panegyrici Latini X, 12, Panegyric of Maximian (289). Translation Nixon & Rodgers 1994, 72-73.

10 Panegyrici Latini XI, 19, Genethliacus of Maximian Augustus (291). Translation Nixon & Rodgers 1994, 102-103.

11 Eutropius, Book IX, 22.

With Carausius, however, as hostilities were found vain against a man eminently skilled in war, a peace was at last arranged.

According to Aurelius Victor, although rebels in Africa and Egypt were suppressed at about this time¹², Carausius was permitted to remain in control of Britain, having been judged capable of governing and defending it¹³. The implication is that Diocletian and Maximian conceded some degree of recognition to Carausius as a matter of expediency while they dealt with other problems, although what form this may have taken is not made clear. Whatever form of recognition was granted to Carausius, it did not last for long.

In March AD 293, Constantius Chlorus was appointed Caesar of the Western Empire and given command of a renewed campaign against Carausius. He quickly succeeded in taking Gesoriacum and this setback apparently undermined the authority of Carausius, who was assassinated. His place was taken by his Chief Finance Officer, Allectus¹⁴, who was involved in the assassination plot. Allectus managed to maintain the independence of Britain for another three years. Eventually, probably in the late summer of AD 296, some of the forces of Constantius, under the command of his Praetorian Prefect¹⁵, managed to land on the British coast. Allectus was killed on the battlefield and Britain came back under the control of the Tetrarchy.¹⁶

The “three emperors” coinage of Carausius

Evidence provided by the coinage of Carausius supports the proposition that he was able to secure a truce with the two emperors on the continent after a failed invasion attempt. It is uncertain whether or not this involved formal recognition of his claim to imperial status, but Carausius was clearly determined to convey that impression to the population under his control.

Roman coins were an important propaganda medium, and in about AD 292 Carausius began to use his coins to promulgate the message that he had become an acknowledged partner of the legitimate emperors across the channel rather than merely being a rebel. Until then his coins had only carried his own portrait, with legends that included the imperial title of *Augustus* in the normal, abbreviated, singular form of AVG. But from

12 Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus*, 39. Translation Bird 1994, 45.

13 Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus*, 39. Translation Bird 1994, 45.

14 Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus*, 39. Translation Bird 1994, 45. Allectus is described as having been ‘entrusted ... to manage the treasury’.

15 Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus*, 39. Translation Bird 1994, 45. ‘Constantius destroyed him through Asclepiodotus, who was his praetorian prefect and was sent ahead with a detachment of the fleet and of the legions’.

16 Eutropius, *Book IX*, 22. *Panegyrici Latini VIII*, 11-19, *Panegyric of Constantius (297)*. Translation Nixon & Rodgers 1994, 126-140.

about AD 292, the plural form AVGGG appeared, signifying the joint rule of three emperors.

The most common theme on the reverse side of these coins was peace and stability, as it had been on the earlier coinage of Carausius. The legend PAX AVGGG (the peace of the three emperors) was by far the most abundant, illustrated by the following example (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Carausius, billon antoninianus, London, c. AD 292-293 (RIC V/II 143)

Obverse: *IMP C CARAVSIVS PF AVG.*
Radiate, draped and cuirassed bust, right.

Reverse: *PAX AVGGG.*
S|P|MLXXI.
Pax standing left, holding olive branch and transverse sceptre

The predominance of Pax types was obviously aimed at persuading the general population that they were safe under the rule of Carausius. Their peaceful existence would be even more secure if he had the support of Diocletian and Maximian, as asserted by this new series of coins. To further emphasise his claims for a new collegial relationship with Maximian and Diocletian, Carausius went as far as issuing some coins from his mints at Londinium (London), and another site somewhere in Britain (the ‘C’ mint), carrying their portraits and titles in place of his own. Most of these also carried the plural AVGGG in their reverse legends.

The location of the ‘C’ mint is still debated, but opinion favours Camulodonum (Colchester). Studies of the geographical distribution of hoards and site finds have not provided support for this view, but apart from suggesting that the source might have been located somewhere in the western part of Britain they have failed to indicate an alternative site¹⁷. It has also been suggested that the ‘C’ mint might have been a mobile mint travelling with Carausius¹⁸, an idea with some appeal considering the dispersed

¹⁷ Lloyd 1998, 6.

¹⁸ Moorhead 2015, 18.

distribution of finds. The most unequivocal coins of all are the rare examples on which the obverse shows the bust of Carausius jugate with those of Maximian and Diocletian, accompanied by the legend CARAVSIVS ET FRATRES SVI (Carausius and his brothers) (Figure 2).



Figure 2 (Image courtesy Classical Numismatic Group, Triton VI Sale, Lot 1074)

It is clear that Diocletian and Maximian were compelled by circumstances to acknowledge Carausius' control of Britain and nearby coastal parts of Gaul, and to cease hostilities against him, at least temporarily. But apart from this series of his own coins there is no evidence that they conceded him imperial status and accepted him into a triarchy.

From a numismatic perspective it is telling that they did not issue coins in the name of Carausius or with the plural titular contraction AVGGG. After Maximian had been raised to the rank of Augustus in April AD 286 until the formation of the Tetrarchy in March 293, reverse legends on coins of Diocletian and Maximian regularly included AVGG, showing that two emperors were ruling together. Had Carausius been formally accepted as a third imperial colleague there can be little doubt that AVGGG would also have appeared on significant numbers of their coins. But it did not. The reality of the situation was that they could not possibly tolerate his secessionist regime and were determined to destroy him as soon as they could manage to marshal the necessary military resources. It seems likely that Carausius used his coinage to lay claim to a greater degree of legitimacy than had actually been granted to him. This could have been intended simply to reassure the general populace, or it could have been aimed more specifically at reinforcing his authority and suppressing latent discontent among the military and the upper classes, the usual breeding ground for coups.

Allectus, the successor of Carausius in Britain, issued no similar coins, confirming that a rapprochement with Diocletian and Maximian had been short-lived and had died with Carausius, if not sooner. Unfortunately, the traditional reference work for the coinage of Carausius (*The Roman Imperial Coinage (RIC) Volume V Part II*) was published in 1933 and is now severely outdated. However, a new edition is in preparation by Dr Sam Moorhead of the British Museum. The most up-to-date, currently available list of

types for the coins issued by Carausius on behalf of, or purportedly in conjunction with, Diocletian and Maximian seems to be that published by Bourne in 2009.¹⁹ The following table summarises the reverse types documented by Bourne, supplemented by a small number of additional types currently listed in the on-line catalogue of the British Museum.²⁰ The table ignores some minor variants in the details of designs and mintmarks.

Summary of published reverse types for Carausius in the names of Diocletian and Maximian

Note: D = Diocletian, M = Maximian, C = Carausius, D/M/C = 3 emperors jugate.

^{BM} signifies types in the British Museum on-line catalogue not listed by Bourne.

Reverse Legend	Reverse Design	Issued For
London Mint		
COMES AVGGG	Minerva standing with spear and shield	M, C
CONSERVAT AVGGG	Hercules standing with globe, lion skin and club	D
CONSERVATORI AVGGG	Hercules standing with bow, lion skin and club	C
HILARITAS AVGGG	Hilaritas standing with palm and cornucopia	M, C
IOVI CONSERVAT AVGGG	Jupiter standing with sceptre and thunderbolt	D
LAETITIA AVGGG	Laetitia standing with wreath and anchor	D
PAX AVGGG	Pax standing holding sceptre and branch or victory on globe	D, M, C, D/M/C
PROVIDENTIA AVGGG	Providentia standing with baton, globe and cornucopia	D, M, C
SALVS AVGGG	Salus standing feeding a snake	D, M, C
SPES AVGGG	Spes standing holding flower and raising skirt	M
[...]TORI AVGGG	Sol in facing quadriga	D
VIRTVS AVGGG	Three Emperors standing left holding globes and batons	D/M/C ^{BM}
VIRTVS AVGGG	Virtus or Mars standing with spear and shield	D, M, C
VIRTVS AVGGG	Trophy between two seated captives	D
VIRTVS AVGGG	Mars advancing with spear and shield	D
VIRTVS AVGGG	Mars advancing with shield, spearing seated captive	C
VIRTVS AVGGG	Three Emperors standing, holding globe and batons	D/M/C ^{BM}

¹⁹ Bourne 2009. The Coinage of Carausius and his Colleagues. 199-206.

²⁰ https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx

Reverse Legend	Reverse Design	Issued For
'C' Mint		
ABVNDAN AVGGG	Abundantia standing emptying cornucopia into modius	C
COMES AVGGG	Victory advancing with wreath and palm	C, D/M/C
CONCORDI AVGGG	Two figures facing, clasping hands	D, C, D/M/C
CONCORDIA AVGGG	Two figures facing, clasping hands	D, C, D/M/ C ^{BM}
FIDES MILIT(VM)	Four standards	D
HILARITAS AVGGG	Hilaritas standing with palm and cornucopia	C
LAETITIA AVGGG	Laetitia standing with wreath and anchor	D, C
MONETA AVGGG	Moneta standing with scales and cornucopia	D, M, C, D/M/C
PAX AVGGG	Pax standing holding sceptre and branch	D, M, C, D/M/C
PAX AVG	Pax standing holding sceptre and branch	D, M
PIETAS AVGGG	Mercury standing with purse and caduceus	C
PROVID AVGGG	Providentia standing with baton, globe and cornucopia or globe and sceptre	D, M, C
PROVIDEN AVGGG	Providentia standing with baton, globe and cornucopia	C
SALVS AVGGG	Salus standing or seated, feeding a snake	M, C
SPES PVBL	Spes standing holding flower and raising skirt	D, M
VICTOR AVGGG	Victory advancing with wreath and palm	C
VICTORI AVGGG	Victory advancing with wreath and palm	D/M/C
VICTORIA AVGGG	Victory advancing with wreath and palm	D, D/M/C
VICTORIA AVGGG	Victory advancing, holding trophy	M
VIRTVS AVGGG	Virtus or Mars standing with spear and shield	D, M, C D/M/C ^{BM}

A few other, as yet unpublished, reverse types are known to exist, but they do not include the type that is the subject of this article (personal communication Dr Sam Moorhead).

The newly identified antoninianus in the name of Diocletian

The newly identified coin was issued by Carausius in the name of Diocletian and was struck at the 'C' mint (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Carausius in the name of Diocletian , Billon Antoninianus, “C” mint, c. AD 292-293

Obverse: *IMP C DIOCLETIANVS P AVG.*

Radiate, draped and cuirassed bust, right.

Reverse: *[.....]DIA AVGGG*

|| SPC

Three togate figures, standing facing each other, possibly clasping hands.

Diameter: 21 mm

Weight: 3.21 gm

The only plausible reading of the reverse legend is *CONCORDIA AVGGG*. The three standing figures are clearly togate and therefore male. They stand in a group facing inwards towards each other. The figure on the right faces to the left, the central figure probably faces left but possibly forward, and the one on the left faces to the right. They may be clasping hands, but this is not clear. In my opinion there is little room for doubt that these are the three emperors; Diocletian, Maximian and Carausius. From their stances one might speculate that the figure on the left is Carausius being welcomed by Diocletian and Maximian. The probable reverse legend refers to the harmony of, or among, the three emperors.

The message conveyed by the iconography of the reverse is particularly interesting and much more specific than usual. Most coins of the series seek to associate the three emperors indirectly through common attributes or shared qualities, usually represented on the reverse by deities or personifications. For example they are bringers of peace (represented by the figure of Pax), share remarkable valour (represented by Virtus), or are all victorious (represented by Victory with her wreath and palm). However, this coin sets out to directly depict Carausius as an equal and acknowledged colleague in a supposedly harmonious relationship with the legitimate emperors Maximian and Diocletian.

The previously undocumented reverse provides unusually clear evidence that Carausius regarded himself as an accepted member of a ruling triumvirate, or at least that he set out to portray himself as such for domestic political purposes. In addition, the use of this reverse design on a coin bearing the name and portrait of Diocletian was undoubtedly

intended to convey the impression that the senior emperor accepted Carausius as an equal. It would be surprising if there had not been a similar piece in the name of Maximian, although no examples of such a coin are known.

There are several known examples of CONCORDIA AVGGG or CONCORDI AVGGG reverses from the ‘C’ mint, but they show only 2 standing figures. The following example is from the British Museum collection (Figure 4):



Figure 4 (Image © Trustees of the British Museum. Museum Number 1962, 1212.1431)

Carausius in the name of Diocletian, billon antoninianus, “C” mint, c. AD 292-293

Obverse: *IMP C DIOCLETIANVS AVG.
Radiate, cuirassed bust, right.*

Reverse: *CONCORDI AVGGG
|| SPC
Two figures standing, facing and clasping hands.*

This coin has the same mintmark and almost the same reverse legend as the newly identified coin. The two standing figures represent the senior emperor Diocletian being greeted by Concordia, or perhaps Diocletian greeting Carausius. Reverse designs of this type were reasonably common during the late Third Century and a similar one was also used on a CONCORDIA MILIT reverse issued by Carausius in his own name. Only a small number of rare reverses with three standing figures are known on Carausian coins, none of which match the newly identified coin. RIC lists a reverse type for Carausius in the name of Diocletian, from an uncertain mint, described as two emperors clasping hands with Victory between them with her hands on their shoulders, the legend being VICTORIA AVGGG.²¹ I have not been able to locate an image of that coin. RIC also lists a reverse for Carausius alone showing three standing winged victories with the legend

21 RIC V, Part II, Carausius, Diocletian and Maximian, 31. The authority cited by RIC for this coin is Webb (1907). Webb in turn cites Cohen (1888) whose authority is a private individual identified as M. Rollin, possibly M. Claude Camille Rollin who was apparently a well known coin dealer in Paris at the time. Incidentally, Rollin was also one of the publishers of the second edition of Cohen’s volumes. The coin was not illustrated in any of the sources.

VICTORIV CARAVSI AV²² and another with three female figures standing, hands upraised and no reverse legend.²³ Each are from an uncertain mint and no images of them could be found. Even without images, it is obvious that none of the coins with three standing figures on the reverse listed in RIC matches the new coin.

Another reverse described as three standing emperors, attributed to the London mint, does not resemble the newly identified coin in any respect. This coin is not in RIC but is listed in the British Museum on-line catalogue. The obverse carries the three jugate busts of Diocletian, Maximian and Carausius, and the reverse legend is VIRTVS AVGGG (Figure 5). The three figures stand in a row facing left, each holds a baton, one holds a globe and they are wearing military tunics. They are quite unlike the figures on the newly identified coin. One other, currently unpublished, coin with three figures on the reverse is known from a single example. It depicts three standing figures, possibly holding scales, thought to be Monetae. It does not match the newly identified coin.²⁴



Figure 5 (Image © Trustees of the British Museum. Museum Number 1938,0715.2)

Carausius with Diocletian and Maximian, billon antoninianus, London mint, c. AD 292-293

Obverse: *Unclear legend.*

Radiate, cuirassed? busts of the three emperors, right, jugate.

Reverse: *VIRTVS AVGGG*

Mintmark unclear in image (attributed to London).

Three emperors standing left, holding globe and batons.

22 RIC V, Part II, Carausius; 530. RIC cites a preliminary report on excavations at St Albans, dated 1931. No further information is available at the time of writing.

23 RIC V, Part II, Carausius; 1063. RIC cited Webb (1907) who cited Petrie (1848). Petrie gave his source as the private collection of a C. R. Smith Esq. Webb's description differs from Petrie's, which was simply "Three figures standing". It is not known if Webb sighted the coin or based his expanded description on a line drawing in Petrie. Unfortunately that drawing is reproduced too poorly in my copy to be helpful.

24 Personal communication – Dr Sam Moorhead.

Dr Sam Moorhead has confirmed that the British Museum collection does not include the newly identified reverse type from the 'C' mint, and he is not aware of the existence of another example (personal communication). Similar responses were received from the Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. At this stage it seems that the newly identified coin may be the only known example, although who can tell when or where another might turn up. It is a significant new find that throws a little more light on an obscure period in the history of Roman Britain.

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Author

John McDonald is a retired mining geologist who now has more time to pursue his interests in ancient history and Roman Imperial coins. Apart from being a member of the Numismatic Association of Australia, he is a member of the Perth Numismatic Society and editor of its journal. He is also a member of the Roman Archaeology Group at the University of Western Australia

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