

## THE ADVICE OF SEVERUS AS REFLECTED IN COINAGE

## CARACALLA'S COINS

THEME

Before he died, Roman Emperor Septimius Severus famously imparted his final words of wisdom to his two sons and co-emperors (*Augusti*), Caracalla and Geta: “Be on good terms with one another, be generous to the soldiers, and don’t care about anything else.” As his coinage shows, Caracalla listened quite well. Unfortunately,

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While campaigning in Britain at the beginning of AD 211, Septimius Severus fell seriously ill. Withdrawing from Caledonia in the north, he took to his sick bed at Eboracum (York) and died on 4 February. Roman historian Cassius Dio stresses that the advice quoted above was really what Severus said (*Roman History* 77.15.2), and he may well be right.

Cassius Dio, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta* document Caracalla’s reign and help us evaluate his response to Severus’ advice, but it is also vividly documented by the coinage produced during his reign.

**“Be on good terms with one another”**

The Roman imperial and provincial coinages struck under Severus had often been at pains to depict Caracalla and Geta in concord with one another and as part of a stable Severan dynasty. Roman gold *aurei* and silver *denarii* depict the family and adver-

tise the “happiness of the age” (*felicitas saeculi*) or show the brothers clasp hands or jointly sacrificing while a surrounding legend refers to the “concord [of the Augusti]” (*concordia Augustorum*) (Figs. 1–2). The two junior Augusti also appear clasp hands or sacrificing together on numerous bronze issues struck in the eastern provinces (Figs. 3–4). Nevertheless, the dying emperor knew his sons well and was rightly concerned that jealousy and competition between Caracalla and Geta might lead them and the empire to ruin.

Although the iconography of *concordia Augustorum* may have continued in use in the provinces until the end of 211, at Rome it stopped soon after the death of

Severus and was replaced by reverse types advertising prosperity and the beginning of a new era (Fortuna, Janus, etc.) on coins featuring the separate portraits of Caracalla and Geta (Fig. 5). Before the end of 211 it was very clear that the brothers, who could not agree on any issues of imperial policy or appointments of officials, were a complete failure as joint rulers. The impasse was solved in December 211, when



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

The painted tondo (center) depicts the young Caracalla and his family. The face of Geta was later removed, in keeping with Caracalla’s policy of *damnatio memoriae* against his brother.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.



Figure 9.

For more information about the various coins discussed in this article, see: <http://tinyurl.com/q6wpsz2>

Caracalla invited Geta to a reconciliation meeting at the apartments of their mother, Julia Domna. Upon Geta's arrival, he was cut down by waiting centurions and left to die in his mother's arms.

Caracalla subsequently ordered the *damnatio memoriae* of his brother, causing his name to be stricken from official documents and his images to be destroyed (see page 19). The most famous material evidence for the execution of this order must be a Severan portrait tondo probably painted in Egypt in c. AD 200 and which now resides in Berlin. Here the face of Geta has been purposefully erased from the painting. The portrait of the murdered Geta was also removed from some large-diameter bronze coins struck in the province of Asia. Local officials used chisels to gouge his image out of the double-portrait coins of Stratonicea in Caria and Pergamon, the provincial capital (Figs. 6–7). The Stratoniceans were so thorough in their obliteration of Geta's image that now very few of their coins are known with his portrait intact. Interestingly, the removal of Geta from the coins of Stratonicea and Pergamon already in circulation are the only numismatic examples of Geta's *damnatio memoriae*, and probably reflect the ostentatious desire of the Pergamenes and especially the Stratoniceans to be seen as zealous supporters of the new one-man regime.

These immediate local responses to Caracalla's attempts to expunge the memory of his brother, while other cities seem to have left their old coins depicting the brothers untouched, should be taken in the context of inter-city rivalry and the display of extreme loyalty in the hopes of future benefaction from the emperor. The isolated nature of these assaults on Geta's numismatic image also shows that Caracalla's order of *damnatio memoriae* was not an edict embracing the entirety of the Empire, but probably strictly enforced only in the environs of Rome, with other provincial and civic authorities (and perhaps even individuals?) left to decide for themselves how severe to be in rooting out the memory of Geta.

### "Be generous to the soldiers"

As we have seen, Caracalla was not an especially good listener to the first part of his father's deathbed advice and the coins bear witness against him. He seems to have done somewhat better in following the second part of his father's advice. In AD 212, the new sole emperor doubled military pay (raised already by 50 or 100% by Septimius Severus in 197) in order to maintain the loyalty of the army. This drastic increase put a great strain on the imperial coffers and Caracalla was compelled to find new and ingenious ways to pay for it. Many of these have left traces in the coinage and had a lasting effect on Roman monetary history.

As a means of making his money stretch to keep up with army pay, Caracalla followed his father's policy in producing *denarii* (Fig. 8) of reduced silver content (46% silver down from 68% in AD 180–194). This low silver content permitted the mint to strike more coins for less silver but still hide the debasement reasonably well. However, circulation wear gradually revealed the truth, causing many individuals to actively buy and hoard older *denarii* of significantly higher silver content. This action of bad money driving good out of circulation, known as Gresham's Law, created a second burden for Caracalla's finances, to which he responded with the creation of even more bad money!

Stepping away from traditional Roman denominations, Caracalla introduced a new coin, called the *antoninianus* after the name of its originator (cf. box on page 9; cf. Fig. 9). The new *antoninianus* was larger in diameter and weighed about 50% more than the emperor's *denarii* but circulated with a face value of two *denarii* (indicated by the radiate crown worn by the imperial portrait on the obverse), thus it is sometimes also referred to as a "double-*denarius*" or "radiate".

As the silver content of the *antoninianus* was no higher than that of Caracalla's *denarii*, the new coin actually increased the flight of *denarii* from the market. Continued debasement of the *antoninianus* under many of

Caracalla's successors resulted in the end of the *denarius* (except as a unit of account, the *denarius communis*) by AD 238. This debasement also killed the local bronze coinages of the eastern provinces not long after.

In addition to manipulating the coinage to offset the cost of maintaining his army, Caracalla also worked to increase the money at his disposal by expanding his tax base. To this end, in AD 212, he bestowed – as discussed on page 20 – Roman citizenship on all free inhabitants of the Empire under the terms of the *Constitutio Antoniniana*.

He also attempted to expand the empire's territory, thereby enriching his soldiers and his coffers, by mounting an invasion of the neighboring Parthian Empire in 216. The troop buildup for this fateful campaign caused an explosion of coin production in the cities of the three Syrian provinces – primarily debased silver tetradrachms pairing the imperial portrait with an eagle (Fig. 10).

The basic typology can be traced back to Syrian provincial coin reforms made during the reign of Nero (Fig. 11), which in turn look back to much older models employed by the Ptolemaic and Seleucid kings in Phoenicia in the third and second centuries BC (Fig. 12).

Much as the introduction of the *antoninianus* set in motion the forces that would ultimately destroy traditional elements of the Roman monetary system, Caracalla's Parthian war was a watershed moment for the Syrian tetradrachm. Except at Antioch, where the denomination continued to be struck until 253/4, production of the tetradrachms at all cities of the region stopped with the assassination of Caracalla in 217 (many struck the tetradrachms for the very first time at the outbreak of the war) and the negotiated end to the conflict by his hapless successor, Macrinus, in 218. Peace was finally bought with reparation payments that may have totaled as much as 50 million *denarii*.

### “Don't care about anything else”

As we have seen, Caracalla's monetary policies were driven primarily by the need to be

generous to the soldiers. This concern is also illustrated by the frequent use of military or other politically relevant types on the coins themselves. Depictions of Mars, Victoria, Securitas, and Virtus are commonplace on the issues of Rome, as are legends referring to LIBERALITAS AVG (the generosity of the emperor), MONETA AVG (the money of the emperor), and FIDES MILITVM (the loyalty of the army) (Fig. 13). At Rome and in the provinces, additional types were struck depicting Caracalla armed for battle and casting him as a Roman version of the most beloved ancient general of all time, Alexander the Great (Fig. 14). Although the emperor advertised his piety by invoking the gods of the Roman pantheon on several coin issues, many of these also seem to recognize the army as the target audience: Venus Victrix is an obvious patron of victory while Sol, Isis, and Serapis all appeal to the Mithraic and Isiac mystery religions that were popularly practiced in the Roman army (Fig. 15). Thus, except for a few Roman issues and locally-struck provincial coins, whose messages often tended to be concerned with civic rather than imperial matters, one might get the impression from the coinage that Caracalla really did not care about much beyond the needs of the army.

### Concluding remarks

This overview of Caracalla's numismatic legacy suggests that he was a relatively good listener to the advice of his father, closely following two of the three deathbed recommendations offered by Septimius Severus. It is unfortunate that except for the first, which Caracalla had given up on by the end of 211 (if he ever accepted it), Severus' other points of advice were extremely short-sighted and through Caracalla's implementation of them ultimately doomed the Empire to decades of civil war and the total collapse of the traditional Roman monetary system. Generosity to the soldiers came at a very high price indeed. **AHM**

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Figure 10.



Figure 11.



Figure 12.



Figure 13.



Figure 14.



Figure 15.