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**M. Durmius’ Aureus**

![Image of M. Durmius’ Aureus](image)

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This gold coin called aureus (lat. *aureus* – “golden”) was struck in 19 BC in Rome by Marcus Durmius, a minter of the emperor placed by numismatists at R4 level on the Sheldon rarity scale, which comprises very scarce specimens. Its weight is estimated to be 7.959 g.

The obverse of the coin carries a portrait of the emperor wearing an oak wreath, encircled with the legend CAESAR AVGVSTVS. Its reverse features a crab holding an insect which could be identified as a butterfly or a dipteran such as a midge or a gnat. The decoration is accompanied by the minter’s name and his official title, *triumvir monetalis*.

The unusual design of the reverse provides a very large field for discussion and interpretation.

The motif comes as a surprise since Rome’s Republican traditions require that the coins struck by a *triumvir monetalis* show on their reverse a notable exploit of his ancestors, the mythological origin of his family or a monument his family has funded. Moreover, it appears to be too extravagant, almost too violent to be considered simply as an image such as can be seen on M. Durmius’ silver denarii depicting hunting scenes.

It is possible to compare the aureus with a set of coins made in the 5th century BC in Akragas, one of the leading Greek cities of Sicily, which regularly used the crab on their reverse, or the denarii struck by C. Cassius Longinus and the legate M. Servilius in 43-42 BC. These figure a crab holing ships’ sterns; below we can see an untied diadem and a rose. However, it is unlikely that Augustus’ aureus is related to the crab was used as a symbol of the river god Akragas, whose name the city had taken; concerning Cassius’s coin, the an allusion to the general’s victory over the Rhodian fleet – thus, the crab stands for the city of Cos, whereas the rose coin eventually that Augustus’ aureus could have been inspired by the coins of Caesar’s murderer.

In 1559, the Italian emblematist Gabriele Simeoni gave a possible explanation of the picture in his work *Le Imprese Hen* illustration of the proverb *Festina lente* (make haste slowly), which had been one of Augustus’ favourite quotes (Suet often been represented as a hare half hidden in a snail shell, a tortoise carrying a sail on its back, and especially a appears on a certain number of Vespasian’s coins. Simeoni suggested that the crab could symbolize, by its slowness, the butterfly rather the rage and the rashness. The juxtaposition of two such opposite species was supposed to call att and rational in every occasion.

A radical change in the interpretation of the reverse was made in 20th century, when the philologist Harold Mattingl *Numismatic Contribution* (The Classical Review 44 [1930], p. 57-59) to regard the image as a homage paid by the emper who had tragically died in 19 BC on his way to Italy after having left to Greece in order to visit the places he had describe as well by Jean-Luc Desnier in 1995 (“Tenet nunc Parthenope”, Latomus 54, p. 298-304).

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Yet this supposition seems too hypothetical and incomplete unless a connection is made between Durmius’ aureus and attributed to the young Virgil. It describes a small incident which occurred to an anonymous shepherd: disturbed in the middle of his nap by a gnat, the old man permitted him to avoid being bitten by a poisonous snake. The link between the poem and the coin was put forward in 1991 a new version concerning Virgil’s death (cf. “La mort de Virgile d’après Horace et Ovide”, Paris, 1993). According to his theory, the poet had been secretly murdered by Augustus, whose power he had been constantly defying by using a kind of double language that permitted him to express unobtrusively his hostility towards Augustus’ despotic regime in his poetry without attracting public attention. The Princeps had been tolerating these covert attacks because he knew that only a readers would be able to feel the harrowing contradiction concealed in Virgil’s verses, and that the poet would be still free to order from Virgil poems to his glory: he would eliminate him, once he would not need him any more. A metic has been written by Augustus himself, who had thus indulged in the luxury of proclaiming cynically his crime and mocking his victim (J. RBPh 76, 1998, p. 75-86). Durmius’ aureus would be a simple “illustration” of the poem: the “gnat” could be in fact a derisive aggressive character of the reverse side. A strong argument for the identification of the crab to the imperial murderer where we read a severe warning against the Crab: Octipated Cancri terga sinistra time, IV, 1, 150 (“fear the avaricious back of the All things considered, all of the interpretations above-cited seem to contribute to clarify the mysterious signification of the extraordinary aureus. Nevertheless, continue to fascinate and confuse both scholars and spectators.

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