

Dimanche 20 juin 2010

M. Durmius' Aureus



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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 era placed by numismatists at R4 level on the Sheldon rarity scale, which comprises very scarce specimens. Its weight is esti

The obverse of the coin carries a portrait of the emperor wearing an oak wreath, encircled with the legend CAESAR AVGVSTVS. The reverse features a large 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* depict a mythological figure, a scene from the family's history, or a monument his family has funded. Moreover, it appears to be too extravagant, almost like a hunting scene 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. The reverse of the coins struck by C. Cassius Longinus and the legate M. Servilius in 43-42 BC. These figures show a crab holding a shield, with a diadem and a rose below. However, it is unlikely that Augustus' aureus is related to the Akragas coins. The crab was used as a symbol of the river god Akragas, whose name the city had taken; concerning Cassius's coin, the diadem and the rose are an allusion to the general's victory over the Rhodian fleet – thus, the crab stands for the city of Cos, whereas the rose coin stands for the city of Rhodes. It is eventually that Augustus' aureus could have been inspired by the coins of Caesar's murderer.

In 1559, the Italian emblemist Gabriele Simeoni gave a possible explanation of the picture in his work *Le Imprese Heraldiche*. He illustrated the proverb *Festina lente* („make haste slowly”), which had been one of Augustus' favourite quotes (Suetonius often represented it as a hare half hidden in a snail shell, a tortoise carrying a sail on its back, and especially a hare). The crab appears on a certain number of Vespasian's coins. Simeoni suggested that the crab could symbolize, by its slowness, the opposite of the butterfly rather than the haste and the rashness. The juxtaposition of two such opposite species was supposed to call attention to the need for haste and rationality in every occasion.

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

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 which permitted him to avoid being bitten by a poisonous snake. The link between the poem and the coin was put forward exposed in 1991 a new version concerning Virgil's death (cf. *"La mort de Virgile d'après Horace et Ovide"*, Paris, 1991, p. 19). Augustus, whose power he had been constantly defying by using a kind of double language that permitted him to remain Augustus' despotic regime in his poetry without attracting public attention. The Princeps had been tolerating these cover-ups: 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 metonymy has been written by Augustus himself, who had thus indulged in the luxury of proclaiming cynically his crime and mocking *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 clear. A strong argument for the identification of the crab to the imperial murderer where we read a severe warning against the Crab: *Octipedis Cancræ terga sinistra time*, IV, 1, 150 ("fear the avaricious ba

All things considered, all of the interpretations above-cited seem to contribute to clarify the mysterious signification which continues to fascinate and confuse both scholars and spectators.

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Par Aleta Alekbarova

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