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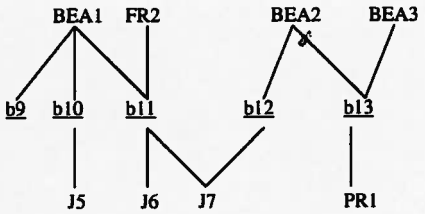
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JULIAN, GALLIENUS, AND THE SOLAR BULL

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The pagan emperor Julian (360–363) issued a new denomination of bronze coin in 362 whose reverse type aroused controversy at the time and whose correct interpretation continues to exercise the ingenuity of modern scholars (Figure 1).[1]

This type depicts a standing bull, with its head erect, facing towards the right. It also depicts two stars above the bull, one above his head and the other above his back. The accompanying reverse legend reads SECVRITAS REI PVB[LICAE], i.e., "the security of the State" (see *RIC* 8 *passim*).[2] Traditionally, coins had associated the legend SECVRITAS

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[1] Julian (*Misopogon* 355d) reveals that the people of Antioch criticized the designs upon his coinage. It is generally agreed that it was his so-called bull coinage in particular that they attacked, although Julian does not explicitly state this. It is also agreed, given that the overwhelming majority of Antiochenes seem to have been Christian, that their criticisms were probably religious in origin rather than purely aesthetic or even economic.

[2] All mints throughout the empire issued this coin with the exception of Alexandria, Rome, and Trier, although the last produced no bronze coinage at all under Julian. It is noteworthy that coins of this type issued at Arles depict an eagle with a wreath in its beak, and another in its talons, to the lower front of the bull. Given that Arles alone produced this variant, the eagle can have no bearing upon our interpretation of the central device of this type, the bull, since it is clear that it did not feature in the original model circulated by the court to the various mints. One also notes that the features of the bulls varied somewhat, with the western mints



FIGURE 1. Coin of Julian with bull image (ANS 1944.100.21966), not to scale.

with a depiction of the personification of this concept. This personification had consisted of a lady holding a scepter and either sitting on a throne or leaning against a column.[3] The use of most such traditional personifications fell into increasing disfavor from the reign of Constantine I (306–337) onwards, resulting in some noticeable new reverse types. In addition to some coins of the traditional type, Constantine's reign also witnessed, for example, the issue c. 325–27 in the name of his mother Helena of coins bearing the legend SECVRITAS REIPVBLICE [*sic*] in association with a standing female figure lowering a branch (*RIC* 7 *passim*).[4] Others simply depicted the emperor himself, in military guise and often accompanied by his sons,[5] while others again, some small bronzes issued c. 336–37 in the name of Constantine's nephew and Caesar Hannibalianus, bore the legend SECVRITAS PVBLICA and depicted the personification of the river Euphrates reclining on the

depicting a smooth-backed bull while the eastern mints favored a hump-backed version. There were differences also in the proximity and sizes of the stars relative to one another.

[3] See, e.g. *RIC* 4.3:22 Gordian III no. 61 for a seated Securitas, 4:31 Gordian III nos. 151–153 for a Securitas standing leaning against a column.

[4] They were issued at all mints that produced bronze coinage.

[5] For the emperor standing alone and erecting a military trophy, see, *RIC* 7:367 Ticinum no. 49, 7:397 Aquileia no. 33, 7:473 Sirmium no. 42, 7:609–610 Nicomedia nos. 53–54, 7:683 Antioch no. 38; for the emperor accompanied by three Caesars, see *RIC* 7:580 Constantinople no. 67, and by four Caesars, *RIC* 7:583 Constantinople no. 89.

ground (*RIC* 7:589 Constantinople nos. 145–148). Constantine's sons and successors issued few types with this legend, for understandable reasons perhaps, and those that they did issue bore the traditional personification of Securitas. However, Julian's successor Jovian (363–364) proved innovative once more and issued gold solidi bearing the legend SECVRITAS REI PVBLICAE which depicted either the enthroned figures of Roma and Constantinopolis bearing a votive wreath or shield between them or a standing figure of the emperor himself holding a standard with a chi-rho upon its flag.[6] Indeed, the personification of Securitas never appeared on coinage after Constantius II (337–361). The imperial brothers Valens (364–378) and Valentinian I (364–375), for example, issued small bronze coins associating the legend SECVRITAS REIPVBLICAE with a depiction of the personification of Victory advancing to the left with a wreath in one hand and a palm in the other (*RIC* 9 *passim*).[7] Hence one ought not to read too much in the decision by Julian not to depict the traditional personification of Securitas on his new reverse type bearing the legend SECVRITAS REI PVB[LICAE]. Furthermore, since he was childless, and without a wife even, Julian could hardly depict himself with his sons in the manner of Constantine I. However, this still does not solve the problem posed by his final choice of design. What did the bull actually symbolize?

Answers have varied. One possibility is that the bull is a Jewish device. This was the interpretation advanced by a contemporary, Ephraem of Nisibis, writing in late 363 or early 364 (Ephraem, *Hymns Against Julian* 1.16–20). He identified the bull with the golden calf worshipped by the ancient Israelites during their wanderings in the desert following their flight from captivity in Egypt (*Exodus* 32.8). However, this is clearly "an idiosyncratic juxtaposition for the sake of his invective" (McVey 1989:231), and it is doubtful in the extreme whether even Ephraem himself could really have believed what he was saying. Certainly no modern historian of antiquity does. A

[6] For the Roma and Constantinopolis type see, e.g., *RIC* 8:230 Arles no. 327, 8:393 Sirmium nos. 113–116, 8:532 Antioch no. 222–224; for the scarcer imperial type, see *RIC* 8:393 Sirmium nos. 109–112, 8:424 Thessalonica no. 229.

[7] They were issued throughout their reigns at all mints that produced bronze coinage.

second interpretation seeks to identify the bull as a sacrificial victim and sees in it a reference to the great number and sizes of the sacrifices which Julian had become accustomed to offer to the gods during his stay at Antioch in late 362 and early 363. This is the interpretation held by the church historians Socrates and Sozomen, to the extent even that Socrates believed that these coins had depicted an altar alongside the bull, although not a single example of such a variant has yet come to light (Soc. *HE* 3.17.4; Soz. *HE* 5.19.2). At best Socrates had never actually seen an example of this reverse type and had simply misinterpreted his immediate source. At worst he deliberately invented this detail in order to lend more credence to his interpretation. A third possibility is that the bull is an Apis bull and that the coin celebrates the discovery under Julian in 362 of a new Apis bull in Egypt.[8] However, the bull on Julian's coin does not bear the characteristic marking of an Apis bull, a crescent on its side.[9] Nor is it accompanied by the same devices which had traditionally accompanied the Apis bull on earlier coinages from the mint at Alexandria, a disc between its horns and an altar to its fore. More significant, perhaps, is that Alexandria was one of the only three mints under Julian not to issue this reverse type. A fourth possibility is that the bull symbolizes the emperor himself, in reference to a common metaphor for leadership of any type, that a leader leads the common people just as a bull leads the rest of his herd (Kent 1954, adducing Dio Chrys. *Or.* 2.66).[10] However, it is not clear why the people of Antioch should have taken issue with the production of coins of this reverse type, if all that had been at stake were such a bland metaphor, and as Julian's own testimony reveals, they certainly did take issue with the design of this coin, even if, unfortunately, he does not specify why exactly they did so. A fifth possibility is that the bull represents the star sign under which Julian had been born.[11] By this interpretation once more,

[8] On the discovery of this bull, see Amm. Marc. 22.14.6.

[9] For what follows see, most conveniently, Gilliard (1964:138–139, esp. pl. X).

[10] J. Vanderspoel (1998:115) draws attention to a fragment of Himerius which utilizes the same basic metaphor.

[11] Proposed by Gilliard (1964:137–141), this interpretation has won the support of, for example, D. Bowder (1978:117–118) and is the only option which Kent (*RIC* 8:47) considers "plausible" apart from his earlier suggestion of the bull as a metaphor for leadership (Kent 1954).

it is the emperor himself who guarantees the "Security of the State", but the main objection to this interpretation remains the same as in the previous case. Why should the people of Antioch, Christian or not, have objected to such a bland commonplace? We may also note that there is no independent corroboration that Julian had actually been born under this star sign. Next we come to the interpretation that has attracted most support over the years, that the bull and stars refer to the Mithraic religion into which Julian may have been initiated.[12] The details of the various Mithraic interpretations differ, but the same objections may be raised against all. The main objection must be that no parallel has been found among Mithraic iconography for the depiction of the bull in the manner that it is depicted upon Julian's reverse type. True, a bull does play a large role in the central icon of Mithraism, the tauroctony or bull-slaying, but it is depicted in a completely different manner, lying low on its stomach almost, with one foreleg bent back under it, the other stretched in front of it, and its head pulled back. A second objection must be that there is no clear evidence that Julian was actually an initiate into the Mithraic mysteries. Finally, one ought not to forget to mention that many scholars, perhaps wisely, have refused to commit themselves to any of the existing interpretations.[13]

It is important at this point, therefore, that we establish some methodological principles. Firstly, the better interpretation of this reverse type is that which provides the better parallel for the depiction of the bull in the manner that he is depicted upon this reverse type. Further-

[12] For example, most recently it is the preferred option of Vanderspoel (1998) and of Barnes (1998:160). In fairness to Barnes, however, he prefaces his statements in favor of a Mithraic interpretation with the warning, "The type has never been convincingly explained".

[13] For example, Browning (1975:156) notes simply that the Antiochenes objected to the "pagan symbolism" of this reverse, while Bowersock (1978:104) proves equally evasive in his description of this type "very probably having some kind of personal or mystical significance for the emperor". More recently, R. Smith (1995:262) commits himself only so far as to state that "J.'s puzzling Bull coinage probably does not show Apis, and certainly not Mithras".

more, the more contemporary the parallel the better, all else being equal. It is not the case that any bull will do if only we can find one somewhere among the relevant iconography to support our prior assumptions. For the unfortunate fact is that the iconography of the ancient world abounded with bulls, and it would be difficult not to find a bull that could be used to support almost any interpretation. For example, the emperor Augustus used a bull to symbolize Armenia upon an aureus issued at Pergamum c. 19–18 BC (*RIC* 1^2:82–83 Augustus no. 514). Given that it was Greater Armenia that lay at the heart of the long-running dispute between Rome and Persia, and that Julian was planning an expedition to end this dispute at the time that he issued his new reverse type, it is rather surprising that no one (to the best of my knowledge) has yet interpreted Julian's reverse type to mean that possession of Greater Armenia was necessary for the security of the state, as a sort of justification for his forthcoming expedition. Indeed, the issue by Constantine I of coins associating the legend SECVRITAS PVBLICA with the personification of the river Euphrates provides a precedent for the interpretation of Julian's coin in this manner in that it proves that this legend could be associated with the symbol of a particular stretch of frontier territory. However, the weakness with this interpretation is that no example exists which represents Armenia as a bull exactly as depicted on Julian's reverse type.

Secondly, the better interpretation is that which better reflects the priorities of Julian himself. For example, a number of lead sealings have survived which reveal that a bull was the symbol of the province of Britannia Inferior (*RIB* nos. 2411.34–36).[14] Most importantly, the bull resembles that upon the coinage under discussion here; he is depicted standing, facing right, with his head erect. It is tempting, therefore, to suppose that the bull continued as the emblem of one of

[14] This identification relies on the expansion of the letters PBI over the bull's back to read P[ROVINCIAE] B[RITANNIAE] I[NFERIORIS]. Yet far more examples of this sealing have also been found at Trier (Leukel 1995:116 nos. 479–491). One may legitimately wonder whether the bull was the symbol rather of the late Roman province of Belgica Prima, the province within which Trier was situated, i.e., that the final I is a numeral rather than a letter, but this makes no difference here.

the two smaller provinces into which Britannia Inferior was subdivided by c. 314. Hence, on the grounds of appearance alone, one might be tempted to argue that Julian's coin could conceal some reference to this British province. However, our knowledge of Julian's priorities and interests reveals no special interest in Britain, so this possibility may be dismissed.

Finally, Julian's reverse type should not be considered in isolation, but in its full numismatic context. This sounds obvious, but it is a principle which has been largely ignored, especially by the advocates of a Mithraic interpretation, old and new alike. These have interpreted the two stars above the bull as symbols either of the Dioscuri or of the two torchbearers who normally accompany Mithras in the bull-slaying scene, Cautes and Cautopates, which identifications rest solely on the dual number of the stars and the prior assumption that the bull must be a Mithraic symbol.[15] Yet several different reverse types throughout the first half of the fourth century depict a star or group of stars above their main device, so it is clear that these are not the property of any one emperor nor peculiar to any one system of beliefs. For example, Constantine issued bronze coins at three western mints c. 321–23 which depicted three stars above a globe on an altar surrounded by the reverse legend BEATA TRANQVILLITAS (*RIC* 7:110–115 London nos. 199–288; 131–134 Lyon nos. 125–208; 190–203 Trier nos. 303–334, 341–355, 368–428). More significantly, Constantine also issued bronze coins c. 330–31 which depicted two stars above a wolf suckling the twins Romulus and Remus, with no surrounding legend, a type which was continued by his sons for a short period after his death (*RIC* 7 *passim* and *RIC* 8 *passim*).[16] Again, Constantius II (337–361) issued silver siliquae which depicted a single star above the central palm in a group of three surrounded by the legend, either CONSTANTIVS AVG in the case of those coins which bore his bust, or CONSTANS AVG in the case of those coins which bore his imperial brother's bust

[15] Thieler (1962) identifies the stars as symbols of the Dioscuri, while Vanderspoel (1998) and Barnes (1998) prefer Cautes and Cautopates.

[16] This type is known as the VRBS ROMA series because the obverse depicted a bust of Roma surrounded by this legend in place of the accustomed imperial bust. They were produced by all mints still in operation at the time.

(*RIC* 8:354 Siscia nos. 60–69). Similarly, Vetranio (350) issued billon coins which depicted a single star above the head of the emperor in military dress as he held a standard in each hand surrounded by the legend CONCORDIA MILITVM, and Constantius II maintained the same type in the immediate aftermath of Vetranio's abdication (*RIC* 8:369 Siscia nos. 270–292; 8:386–387 Sirmium nos. 21–22, 28–29, 33–34; 8:414–418 Thessalonica nos. 130–132, 135, 167). In context, therefore, it is clear that the stars on Julian's reverse type merely continue this iconographical tradition. Given the acceptance of the use of stars in this way by Constantine I himself at a time when he was indubitably Christian, it is clear that they did not bear even a vaguely pagan meaning, let alone a peculiarly Mithraic one. Rather, a star or group of stars seems to have come to be used to denote a divine presence in an entirely generic fashion acceptable to either pagans or Christians.[17] The number of these stars was largely irrelevant, therefore a matter of aesthetics or the amount of space available in the reverse field, rather than a necessary function of the number or nature of the God or gods whose presence was being signified. Hence the two stars above the bull's head and back on Julian's reverse type have no bearing on the symbolism of the bull itself other than to signify a divine presence in the vaguest sense. They do not even clarify whether the bull itself is to be interpreted as the symbol of a god or whether a divine presence merely attends upon the bull in a fashion which can only be determined by the final identification of the bull itself.

It is at this point that I wish to introduce a piece of evidence which seems to have been ignored until now. The emperor Gallienus (253–268) issued a series of coins at Rome which named nine different gods or goddesses as the protectors of the emperor, each depicting a single animal as the symbol of the cult of the relevant god or

[17] The use of stars in this manner was a long-standing iconographical tradition. For example, Caligula (37–41) had depicted the head of the deified Augustus (27 BC–AD 14) between two stars (*RIC* 1^2:108 Gaius nos. 1–2). A fourth-century gold-glass medallion depicts two stars on either side of St. Agnes in an eerily similar fashion (Elsner 1998:233).

goddess.[18] So, for example, the coin which bears the (expanded) legend LIBERO P[ATRI] CONS[ERVATORI] AVG[VSTI] depicts a tigress, while the type which bears the legend IOVI CONS[ERVATORI] AVG[VSTI] depicts a goat. In some cases, though, several different reverse types are associated with the same god. So, for example, the coins dedicated to Hercules depict either a lion or a boar. Again, the coins dedicated to Sol, those which bear the legend SOLI CONS[ERVATORI] AVG[VSTI], depict either a winged horse or a bull, and it is the latter type which is of interest to us here (Figure 2).[19]



FIGURE 2. Coin of Gallienus with bull image
(by permission of Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.).

This type depicts a bull standing upright, with its head erect, exactly as on the Julianic reverse type. Indeed, it normally faces right as on the Julianic reverse type, although some specimens depict it facing left. It is irrelevant for the moment why exactly this bull should symbolize the cult of Sol, except to note, for example, that there is no indication that it was a sacrificial animal. In truth, there is no indication that any of the animals depicted on this series of coins

[18] In general, see Weigel (1990); also Carradice (1983). I thank Prof. Carradice for a copy of this appendix.

[19] For the winged-horse-type, see *RIC* 5.1:155 Gallienus nos. 282–284; for the bull-type, see *RIC* 5.1:156 Gallienus no. 285.

were intended to represent sacrificial offerings to the relevant gods or goddesses. This is obviously true in the case of the mythical animals, such as the winged horse on the other reverse type dedicated to Sol, or the griffin or centaur on the types dedicated to Apollo, but it holds true for the other types also.[20] The key point as far as we are here concerned is that the legend of the coin identifies the bull as a symbol of the cult of Sol in the most unambiguous fashion possible. This raises the possibility that the bull on the Julianic reverse type is a symbol of the cult of Sol also. This is not to claim that Julian was necessarily familiar with the Gallienic reverse type, but that they constitute independent testimonies to a wider iconographical tradition which has not left much mark otherwise.[21]

Since the identity of the bull on the Gallienic reverse type with the bull on the Julianic reverse type fulfills the requirement of our first methodological principle as already outlined, we now turn to our second principle. Would the presence of a symbol of the cult of Sol on his coinage reflect what we otherwise know about priorities of Julian himself? The answer is yes. Julian devoted a whole work to Sol, or Helios to call him by his Greek title, his *Hymn to King Helios,* which he composed at Antioch in late 362. In contrast, we know of no work dedicated to Mithras himself, for example. On the contrary, those who claim that Julian was a Mithraic initiate have to admit the dominance of Sol/Helios in his explicit testimony in order to press their case by identifying Sol and Mithras, or at least by stressing the solar aspects of the cult of Mithras.

It is my argument, therefore, that the bull on Julian's reverse type was a Solar rather than a Mithraic symbol. Admittedly, the distinction

[20] Carradice (1983:188) sees in the winged horse a reference to the chariot which Sol drove across the sky each day. As for the lion and boar on the coins dedicated to Hercules, he identifies these with the Nemean lion (1983:188) and the Erymanthian boar (1983:192) from the labors of Hercules. Hence the animals can be seen to derive from myth rather than cultic practice.

[21] Given the rarity of the Gallienic reverse type—only 19 examples out of the 2,646 coins of this series found in the Cunetio hoard—and the fact that it was issued so long before Julian's own reign, it is unlikely in the extreme that he ever came across a piece of this type.

between the gods Sol and Mithras was not always clear,[22] but if we accept that there was a spectrum of beliefs and images between those unique to the cult of Sol on the one hand and those unique to the cult of Mithras on the other, then it is my argument that, as depicted, the bull belonged at one extreme of this spectrum, among the images unique to the cult of Sol, rather than at the opposite extreme, among the images unique to the cult of Mithras, the position favored by those who would identify this bull with the bull of the Mithraic tauroctony.

Finally, if the bull is a Solar symbol, what is the message of Julian's reverse type? This depends, of course, on how and why the bull became a symbol of the cult of Sol. However, one possibility, which has the merit of being consistent with the accompanying legend SECVRITAS REI PVB[LICAE], is that the use of the bull in this fashion hearkens back to the legend of Helios's cattle as preserved by the *Odyssey*, for example (Homer, *Od.* 12.327–425).[23] According to this legend, Odysseus's men slaughtered and consumed some of Helios's cattle on the island of Sicily. Helios then appealed to Zeus to punish Odysseus's men, and Zeus sank Odysseus's ship, sparing only Odysseus because he himself had not sanctioned, nor participated in, the consumption of the cattle. The message of Julian's coin, therefore, is that Sol protects that which belongs to him. More specifically, using the myth of the cattle of Sol/Helios as a metaphor, the two stars symbolize the protective presence of Sol while the bull represents the state. In brief, it is Sol who guarantees the SECVRITAS REI PVB[LICAE]. The second merit of this interpretation, of course, is that it is also consistent with the thought and taste of an emperor who was accustomed to pepper his works with quotations from or allusions to both

[22] For example, according to R. Beck (1998:123–124), Mithraism was invented by members of the Commagenian royal family and their supporters in the mid to late first century AD, and "the 'invention' of Helios-Mithras in the Commagenian royal cult [first century BC] is sufficient causal explanation of the solarity of Mithras in the Mysteries", i.e., that the tendency to identify Sol and Mithras, to varying degrees, had been present in Mithraism from the start.

[23] Admittedly, Homer does not mention bulls as such. However, they play a large part, for example, in the mathematical problem which Archimedes posed to Eratosthenes of Cyrene in the form of a discussion of the number of bulls in the various herds owned by Helios on Sicily (Thomas 1941:203–205).

of the great Homeric epics. Last, but not least, this interpretation reveals the coin as an artistic representation, a continuation even, of a metaphor which Julian himself had first used in his speech *Against the Cynic Heraclius,* which he had delivered at his court in Constantinople during early 362. In this, Julian depicts Helios asking him what he thinks of his cousin's shepherds and herdsmen, in other words, of Constantius II's senior appointees, and when Julian replies that they are destroying the flocks, Helios reveals that he intends to set Julian in his cousin's place to remedy this situation (*Against Heraclius* 232a-c). So it is by his appointment of Julian as emperor in particular that Sol guarantees the security of his herds, the state.

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