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Caesar the Elephant against Juba the Snake

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On the basis of the hoard evidence, Crawford dates Julius Caesar's issue of a denarius with a reverse depicting an elephant about to trample a rising snake (*RRC* 443) to 49-48 BC, and identifies it as his first issue after his rebellion in 49.[1] He then argues that the design 'was intended to symbolise victory over evil'. More recently, Linderski argues similarly that 'the elephant on the reverse, a symbol of victory and strength, promised destruction of his [Caesar's] treacherous enemies'.[2] Hence both agree that the elephant symbolises victory, that the snake symbolises evil in some sense, and that the reverse as a whole celebrates the generic triumph of good over evil.[3] They agree that the reverse does not allude to any specific military event, past or prospective. Both commentators specifically reject the arguments of Alföldi that the elephant symbolises Caesar in particular, that the snake symbolises Africa, and that the reverse as a whole celebrates Caesar's campaign in Africa 47-46.[4] However, the fact that Alföldi erred in his attempt to redate this issue to 47-46 does not in itself require that he erred in his interpretations of all of the individual features on this reverse. He argued that the elephant symbolised Caesar in particular on the basis

[1] M.H. Crawford, *Roman Republican Coinage*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 89, 735. The coin illustrated above is BM 2002-1-2-4406 (Hersh bequest).

[2] J. Linderski, 'Q. Scipio Imperator', in J. Linderski (ed.), *Imperium Sine Fine: T. Robert S. Broughton and the Roman Republic*, Historia Einzelschriften 105 (Stuttgart, 1996), pp. 145-186, at 173.

[3] This interpretation is now commonplace in academic studies. See, for example, K.W. Harl, *Coinage in the Roman Economy, 300BC to AD700* (Baltimore, 1996), p. 55, claiming that Caesar produced this reverse type 'to proclaim the justice of his cause'. One weakness with this interpretation is that although our Judaeo-Christian culture predisposes us to interpret the snake in a negative fashion, the snake did not in fact constitute an unambiguous symbol of evil in Greco-Roman antiquity. On the contrary, the Roman domestic *lararium* normally depicted the *genius* of the *paterfamilias* or place as a snake, often crested and bearded. Furthermore, it was believed that the gods could take the form of snakes to father exceptional leaders (Plut. *Alexander* 2.4; Suet. *Augustus* 93), and they were also kept as pets (Pliny, *NH* 8.61; Suet. *Tiberius* 72).

[4] A. Alföldi, 'Die Erklärung des Namens 'Caesar' in den spätrömischen Kompendien (zu v. Ael. 2,3-5)', in *Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium 1966/67* (Bonn, 1968), pp. 9-18.

that a series of late Roman literary sources preserve a belief that the first person to be called Caesar had been so named because he had killed an elephant, the name for which in Punic was *caesai*.[5] The fact that none of these sources date before the fourth century AD does not mean that this etymology can be dismissed as a late Roman invention. It may well have circulated for centuries before this, and it is not impossible that Caesar did intend the elephant on this reverse to symbolise himself in allusion to a popular etymology of his name.[6] On the other hand, Alföldi could not adduce sufficient evidence to prove that the snake symbolised Africa in particular. Here Linderski takes Alföldi to task for misleading quotation from, and use of, the testimony of Pliny the Elder (*NH* 8.32) which, when read in full, proves that India was the proper place of the struggle between elephants and giant snakes, not Africa. Nevertheless, the fact remains that such beasts did occur in Africa, and that, in the political context of the day, those witnessing the reverse type would instantly have thought of Africa, not India.

The purpose of this note is to draw attention to overlooked evidence which suggests that Alföldi was nearer to the truth in this matter than has been realised, but that the snake symbolised King Juba I of Numidia in particular rather than Africa more generally. The key to the interpretation of the snake lies in its depiction with what is sometimes called a dragon's head, including some form of protuberance sweeping backwards from the top or back of its head. Here the small scale and the fact that the snake is depicted in profile prevents easy identification of this element. Is it a horn ? Or is it a crest ? The best way to approach this problem is to ask how a contemporary Roman might have imagined a monstrous, dangerous snake to look. Virgil provides the classic description of such a beast when he describes how a pair of snakes attacked the Trojan priest Laocoön on the beach near Troy (*Aeneid* 2.203-08):

> *ecce autem gemini a Tenedo tranquilla per alta*
> *(horresco referens) immensis orbibus angues*
> *incumbunt pelago pariterque ad litora tendunt:*
> *pectora quorum inter fluctus arrecta iubaeque*
> *sanguineae superant undas: pars cetera pontum*
> *pone legit sinuatque immensa volumine terga.*

> And lo! from Tenedos, over the peaceful depths – I shudder as I speak – a pair of serpents with endless coils are breasting the sea and side by side making for the shore. Their bosoms rise amid the surge, and their crests, blood-red, overtop the waves; the rest of them skims the main behind and their huge backs curve in many a fold.[7]

[5] The earliest are: Servius, *Aen.* 1.286; SHA, *Aelius* 2.3-5; Lydus, *De Mensibus* 4.102.

[6] See F. Ahl and E. Fantham, *Virgil: Aeneid* (Oxford, 2007), p. 381, where it is accepted that Caesar alludes to this etymology in this reverse-type, and that Virgil may have been familiar with it also. On the popularity of such play upon names, see E.S. McCartney, 'Puns and Plays on Proper Names', *CJ* 14 (1919), pp. 343-358; V. Matthews, 'Some Puns on Roman *Cognomina*', *G & R* 20 (1973), pp. 20-24.

[7] Text and translation from H.R. Fairclough (revised by C.P. Goold), *Virgil I*, Loeb Classical Library 63 (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), pp. 330-331.

This suggests that the protuberance sweeping back from the head of the snake represents a crest viewed in profile rather than a horn. The key point here lies in the Latin term used to describe the crest of a snake – *iuba*.[8] This is identical to the Latin form of the name of King Juba of Numidia, *Iuba*. It is arguable, therefore, that Caesar chose to depict a crested snake in particular upon this reverse type in order to play upon the fact that King Juba's name could be interpreted to mean 'snake-crest' in Latin.[9] Hence the reverse depicted an elephant, Caesar, about to crush a crested snake, Juba.The fact that Caesar did not in fact defeat the Pompeian forces in Africa, together with their ally Juba, until the battle of Thapsus on 6 April 46 does not tell against this interpretation. Here one must remember that Caesar had originally sent the propraetor Gaius Scribonius Curio against the Pompeian forces in Africa, including Juba, during the summer of 49, although this expedition had ended in disaster when Juba defeated Curio at the battle of the Bagradas River in August of that year.[10] It is arguable, therefore, that Caesar issued the reverse type symbolising him attacking Juba in association with his despatch of Curio to Africa in 49.[11] It is entirely consistent with his propaganda during the greater part of the civil-war period that he should have highlighted his actions against a foreign enemy, even though he and most his troops were actually engaged against fellow Romans. It is no more incongruent that he should have misrepresented his despatch of an army to Africa as an attack upon Juba in particular than that he should have celebrated a triumph for his final success there in 46 as if this had been against Juba alone also.[12] Indeed, this initial reluctance to appear to celebrate his actions against his Roman enemies also forms the strongest argument against the interpretation of this reverse type as advocated by Crawford, Linderski, and others.[13] The problem with a reverse type

[8] On *iuba* , see *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae VII*, 2 (Leipzig, 1990), cols. 570-574, esp. 571 on its use to mean 'snake-crest'. Other possible meanings included 'mane'. Cicero, *De lege agraria* 2.59, puns upon the latter reading of Juba's name. If this was a well known joke, it may have encouraged plays upon the alternative meanings of *iuba*.

[9] This is not to claim that it was in any way unusual to depict a crest upon a snake on ancient coins, but that Caesar was careful to include it upon the snake on this occasion simply because it lent itself so well to the necessary word-play. For other crested snakes, see e.g. *RRC* no. 379, 1-2, by L. Procilius in 80; *RRC* no. 385, 3, by M. Volteius in 78.

[10] Caes. *B Civ.* 2.23-44; Appian, *B Civ.* 2.44-46; Dio 41.41-42. On the history of Juba's relationship with Rome, see D.W. Roller, *The World of Juba II and Kleopatra Selene: Royal Scholarship on Rome's African Frontier* (London, 2003), pp. 30-38.

[11] There was no danger that Juba would suddenly desert the Pompeian cause in favour of Caesar. He was a personal enemy of Caesar's since Caesar had humiliated him by pulling at his beard during a trial at Rome in 63. See Suet. *Caes.* 71. Furthermore, Caesar's choice of Curio to command his African expedition seems designed to inflame feelings, since as tribune of the plebs in 50, Curio had actually proposed that Rome should confiscate the kingdom of Numidia. See Caes. *B Civ.* 2.25; Dio 41.41.

[12] Plut. *Caes.* 55 emphasises that he celebrated his triumph for his victory in Africa as if it had been against Juba alone, without even mentioning the Pompeian commander Metellus Scipio. Appian, *B Civ.* 2.101, makes the same point, that the triumph was celebrated for his victory against the African allies of Scipio, but does note that some of the pictures displayed in the triumph featured Roman commanders also, and that this greatly displeased the Roman crowd.

[13] Plut. *Caes.* 56 emphasises that Caesar's celebration of a triumph for his defeat of the sons of Pompey in Spain in 45 was the first time that he had celebrated a triumph for a victory against fellow Romans, and was controversial for this reason.

celebrating some form of generic attack upon, or triumph over, evil is that such a reverse could have been too easily misinterpreted in reference to Caesar's domestic enemies, Pompey the Great in particular. Yet Caesar would not have wanted to risk this, which indicates that, in his mind at least, his chosen reverse type was clear in its attack upon a foreign enemy, Juba, rather than upon the domestic enemy, Pompey.

The fact that Caesar chose to represent himself as an elephant about to crush the snake Juba was, first and foremost, a clever play upon both their names. However, such a representation must also have appealed to that same savagery which had led him to declare to the senate, while consul in 59, that he would trample upon the heads of his enemies.[14] It is not surprising, therefore, that his first reverse type following his rebellion in 49 makes a similar promise, even if it was carefully directed at a foreign rather than a domestic enemy.

[14] Suet. *Caes.* 22.2: *frequenti curia iactaret, invitis et gementibus adversariis adeptum se quae concupisset, proinde ex eo insultaturum omnium capitibus.*