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Title	Commodus, Phaethon, and Ovid?
Authors	Woods, David
Publication date	2020-12-01
Original Citation	Woods, D. (2020) 'Commodus, Phaethon, and Ovid?', Numismatic Chronicle, 180, pp. 133-142.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
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Download date	2026-11-07 10:49:16
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/14022

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The Numismatic Chronicle 180 Offprint

Commodus, Phaethon, and Ovid?

by

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LONDON
THE ROYAL NUMISMATIC SOCIETY
2020

Commodus, Phaethon, and Ovid?

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Abstract: It is argued that the reverse of a newly-discovered medallion of Commodus has nothing to do with Mt Argaeus in Cappadocia despite some superficial similarities between its depiction of a mountain and the standard depiction of Mt Argaeus on the coinage of Caesarea in Cappadocia. On the contrary, it probably depicts Phaethon in the chariot of the sun as he descends too near the earth, an interpretation supported by the fact that the brief reverse legend seems to abbreviate a half-line from Ovid's description of that event.

A unique, unpublished bimetallic medallion of Commodus (sole reign AD 180-92) in copper and orichalcum was recently sold at auction (**Fig. 1**), but it deserves rather more attention than is possible in an auction catalogue. The obverse depicts a three-quarter bust of Commodus facing left while he holds a Victory-on-a-globe before him in his right hand and cradles a thunderbolt in his left arm. There is no accompanying legend, so the emperor has to be identified on the basis of appearance alone, but there is no reason to doubt that this laureate and heavily bearded individual is identifiable as a depiction of the mature Commodus. Furthermore, his possession of a thunderbolt makes it clear that he is being depicted in the guise of Jupiter. The reverse depicts a male charioteer, nude except for a cloak about his waist, driving a chariot of four horses from right to left over the top of an apparent mountain. About half-way down the slope before him, a rider holding a long torch drives his horse upwards and outwards from the mountain. Furthermore, about half-way down the slope behind him, a rider holding a long torch gallops his horse down the slope. Some form of a hollow occupies most of the upper half of the mountain, and a stream seems to flow from this down the left-hand side of the mountain, but some of the details here remain uncertain.[1] Two trees occur on each slope, one each above and below the rider there, while two smaller bushes or trees spring up on either side of the central boulder at the base of the mountain and a third, largely obscured by wear, stands in front of it. A boar is depicted running across the face of the mountain just above this boulder, and some sort of lizard is depicted just beyond the bush on either side of it. A row of seven stars curves upwards along the edge of the field to the left of the design, while a similar row also seems to curve upwards along the edge of the field to the right also, although wear and encrustation conceal their full number. Finally, the legend **TSOF** occurs at the very top of the reverse, immediately above the heads of the horses pulling the chariot.

[1] The cataloguer thinks that he sees a wolf facing right, possibly with twins below it, standing over the stream as it descends the mountain. Yet this would leave the twins sitting in the water. The presence of the wolf is doubtful, and of the twins impossible. The apparent body of the wolf may actually be some sort of rock lip around the pool through which the stream flows down the slope.



Fig. 1. Bimetallic medallion of Commodus (60mm, 206g). Ex Nomos, Auction 19 (17 November 2019), lot 280. © Nomos AG.

The purpose of this paper is to propose a new interpretation of the scene depicted on the reverse of this medallion differing from that offered in the auction catalogue, and, in particular, to suggest a new explanation of the legend **TSOF**. It is noticeable that although the cataloguer does attempt to identify all of the individual elements within the design, he does not attempt to offer any overarching explanation of how these elements relate to one another. To be more specific, he tentatively identifies the charioteer as Sol, the rider on the slope before him as Phosphoros, the morning star, the rider on the slope behind him as Hesperos, the evening star, the apparent mountain as Mt Argaeus in Cappadocia, and the central boulder at the base of the mountain as the omphalos, the centre of the world. However, he does not explain this apparent association between Sol and Mt Argaeus, why the centre of the world should be located at the base of Mt Argaeus, or why Commodus, who spent most of his reign in or about Rome and is not known to have ever visited Mt Argaeus, should suddenly have taken such a strong interest in that place, assuming that reverse-types on medallions such as this do reflect imperial interests to some extent at least.[2] On a more minor note, he also identifies the two creatures on either side of the alleged omphalos as crocodiles, although this identification is inconsistent with the identification of the mountain as Mt Argaeus in Cappadocia since, as far as the Romans knew, crocodiles lived only in Egypt or thereabouts. Finally, he expands the letters **TSOF** as *Tempus Saeculorum*, *Omnia Felicia* 'The time of the ages, all things are happy' without explaining how he reached this reading, what exactly it means, or how it relates to the scene depicted below it.

[2] On the reign of Commodus, see e.g. O. Hekster, *Commodus: An Emperor at the Crossroads* (Leiden, 2002); É. Teyssier, *Commode: L'empereur gladiateur* (Paris, 2018).



Fig. 2. Drachm of Caesarea in Cappadocia (16mm (2x), 4.26g) under Commodus. Ex Roma Numismatics, E-Sale 46 (5 June 2018), lot 437. © Roma Numismatics Ltd.

Against the Identification of the Mountain with Mt Argaeus

At first sight, the identification of the charioteer as Sol seems assured by his physical appearance (male, apparently clean-shaven), his association with a four-horse chariot, and the fact that he appears to be about to launch his chariot into the sky. He does not appear to be radiate, but Sol was not always radiate.[3] Furthermore, the coinage of Commodus confirms that he had a minor interest at least in the cult of Sol.[4] The identification of the rider as Sol is reinforced by the fact that the two riders on either side of him seem to represent stars, probably Phosphoros and Hesperos, exactly as identified by the cataloguer. The most obvious difficulty with cataloguer's interpretation lies in the identification of the apparent mountain as Mt Argaeus. The mint at Rome had never depicted Mt Argaeus on any imperial coins or medallions previously, would never do so subsequently either, and there is no obvious reason why it should have done so under Commodus.[5] Indeed, it had only ever depicted

[3] So S.E. Hijmans, *Sol: The Sun in the Art and Religions of Rome*, PhD dissertation, Universiteit Groningen, 2009, p. 73, states: 'Important though it may be, the representation of emanating light is not an essential element of Sol's iconography, and in rare cases he can appear without any visualized radiance at all'. In fact such cases are not at all rare: compare for example the many unradiate portraits of Helios on the late Classical and early-mid Hellenistic silver and gold coinages of Rhodes.

[4] The bust of Sol appears on the reverse of an aureus struck in AD 186 (*RIC* 119 = *MIR* 18, 706). A small group of medallions struck in AD 191/192 also depict the radiate bust of Commodus iugate with a female bust normally identified as Roma (*MIR* 18, 1158-61). H. Dressel, *Die römischen Medaillone des Münzkabinetts der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin* (Dublin/Zurich, 1973), pp. 154-61, interprets the presence of this radiate crown as an attempt by Commodus to identify himself with a sun god. M.R. Kaiser-Raiss, *Die stadtrömische Münzpragung während der Alleinherrschaft des Commodus. Untersuchungen zur Selbstdarstellung eines römischen Kaisers* (Frankfurt am Main, 1980), p. 51, wonders similarly. However, it is doubtful whether the radiate crown has any real religious significance in these cases. Furthermore, even if it did, one needs to remember that radiate crowns were not all necessarily solar. See Hijmans, *Sol: The Sun in the Art and Religions of Rome*, pp. 509-48.

[5] However, the mint at Rome did strike some issues of the provincial coinage of Caesarea, including types depicting Mt Argaeus, during the period from Vespasian to Marcus Aurelius. See e.g. W.E. Metcalf, *The Silver Coinage of Cappadocia, Vespasian-Commodus* (New York, 1996), pp. 83-90; K. Butcher and M. Ponting, 'Rome and the East: production of Roman provincial silver coinage for Caesarea in Cappadocia under Vespasian, AD 67-79', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 14 (1995), 63-77; B. Woytek, 'Die bilinguen Münzen Traians. Eine Fallstudie zu numismatischen Erscheinungsformen des Bilingualismus im römischen Reich', *Chiron* 41 (2011), 417-55, at 444-49.

a mountain on Roman coinage once before, on a denarius of the late republic.[6] However, Caesarea in Cappadocia had frequently depicted Mt Argaeus upon the reverse of its coinage since the initial Roman annexation of Cappadocia under the emperor Tiberius (AD 14-37) and would continue to do so until it ceased striking coins under Gordian III (AD 238-44).[7] So if the medallion does depict Mt Argaeus, one might expect it to bear a strong resemblance to the standard depiction of this mountain on the coinage of Caesarea, particularly that appearing on the coinage under Commodus himself (**Fig. 2**).



Fig. 3. Drachm of Caesarea in Cappadocia (18mm (2x), 3.58g) under Tiberius (*RPC* 3620). Ex Roma Numismatics, E-Sale 63 (7 November 2019), lot 474. © Roma Numismatics Ltd.

One must admit that there certainly are some similarities between the mountain on the medallion and the standard depiction of Mt Argaeus on the coinage of Caesarea. Both mountains are depicted with numerous rocky outcrops or boulders. Both are depicted with a large, roughly triangular cavern or hollow near the summit. Yet there are important differences also. The major difference lies in the profile of the mountain. The mountain depicted on the medallion displays a single peak, while the standard depiction of Mt Argaeus usually displayed three peaks, a narrow peak to the lower left of the main peak, the main peak itself, and a substantial third peak to the lower right of the main peak, and it had been consistently depicted in this way since the reign of Tiberius (**Fig. 3**). However, another difference is that the standard depiction of Mt Argaeus did not usually include any animals on its slopes, while the mountain depicted on the medallion displays several such animals.[8] Hence, while there are similarities between the depiction of the mountain on the medallion and the typical depiction of Mt Argaeus on the coinage of Caesarea, the medallion does not necessarily depict Mt Argaeus.[9] One might allow that the engraver responsible for

[6] The temple of Venus on Mt Eryx in Sicily was depicted on the reverse of a denarius in 57 BC (*RRC* 424/1).

[7] For a full catalogue of various depictions of Mt Argaeus with special attention to the coinage, see P. Weiss, 'Argaios/Erciyes Dağı- Heiliger Berg Kappadokiens. Monumente und Ikonographie', *JNG* 35 (1985), pp. 21-48.

[8] Coins of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus sometimes depict a stag at the base of the mountain. See F. Imhoof-Blumer, *Monnaies grecques* (Amsterdam, 1883), p. 418; E.A. Sydenham, *The Coinage of Caesarea in Cappadocia* (London, 1933), nos 321-330, 332.

[9] One might try to explain the differences in terms of scale, arguing that the medallion depicts the central peak of Mt Argaeus viewed up close, while the coinage of Caesarea prefers a panoramic depiction of the three peaks viewed from a much greater distance. But such a difference in scale would itself undermine any attempt to identify the mountain depicted on the medallion with the standard depiction of Mt Argaeus.

the medallion may have been influenced by the standard depiction of Mt Argaeus, but even this is not necessary. One can easily imagine a mountain possessing a cave, stream, rocky outcrops, and large boulders without knowing anything about Mt Argaeus. Finally, one should also note that while the coins of Caesarea often depicted one or more figures standing on Mt Argaeus, or one or more stars shining above its peaks, they never seem to have depicted a god driving a chariot over or above it.[10]



Fig. 4. AE medallion of Commodus (41mm, 69.60g); *MIR* 18, 1149. Ex CNG, Auction 112 (11 September 2019), lot 635. © Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.

So if the apparent mountain on the medallion is not identifiable as Mt Argaeus, what does it represent? A comparison of the reverse of this medallion to that of another medallion of Commodus of broadly similar theme struck in AD 190/91 (**Fig. 4**) may prove helpful.[11] While the only legend on the reverse of the latter medallion – COS VI•P•P in the exergue – serves simply to date it to the 6th consulship of Commodus (AD 190), or shortly thereafter, there can be no doubt about the significance of the scene depicted upon it. This depicts a youthful male, confirmed as Sol by his radiate crown and other attributes, driving a chariot of four horses up a bank of clouds.[12] He is preceded by a half-length figure holding a lighted torch in both hands at the top of the bank of clouds, probably identifiable as Phosphoros once more. As Sol drives the chariot up the bank of clouds, he passes over a female figure reclining on the ground with right hand raised towards him and a cornucopia cradled in her left arm. She is probably identifiable as Tellus, the personification of the productive power of the earth. Hence the scene depicts Sol rising above Tellus, that is, the sun rising above the earth. The inclusion of Tellus in this scene is important because most numismatic

[10] The fact that three standing figures are sometimes depicted on Mt Argaeus, or that three stars are sometimes depicted above it, encourages the belief that three gods were actually worshipped there and that these were the personifications of the three peaks. A.B. Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Religion* 2.2 (Cambridge, 1925), p. 980, identifies the god of the main peak as Zeus and those of the two lesser peaks as the Dioscuri. Sydenham, *The Coinage of Caesarea*, p. 20, identifies the god of the main peak as the Genius of Argaeus. In contrast, Metcalf, *The Silver Coinage of Cappadocia*, passim, prefers to identify him with Helios instead. There is no easy solution to this problem. Weiss, 'Argaios/Erciyes Dağı', pp. 45-57, does not commit himself in this matter. The identification of the god of the main peak as Helios (Sol) rests on the mistaken assumption that the radiate crown was peculiar to him. However, possession of the radiate crown alone is not enough to identify even a beardless youth as Sol. See Hijmans, *Sol: The Sun in the Art and Religions of Rome*, pp. 513-15.

[11] F. Gnecchi, *I Medaglioni Romani* 2.1 (Milan, 1912), p. 52, pl. 78, nos 3-4 = *MIR* 18, 1149.

[12] On this and similar depictions of Sol, see Hijmans, *Sol: The Sun in the Art and Religions of Rome*, pp. 408-11.

depictions of Sol in his chariot, admittedly rare before the reign of Commodus but increasingly common subsequently, do not include her.[13] It was common knowledge that Sol guided his chariot through the air far above the earth, and little need was felt to confirm this by surrounding him with clouds or placing Tellus beneath him. In most cases, his horses were simply depicted with front legs raised high into the air as if they were just springing up into flight. Hence the inclusion of Tellus in this scene suggests some extra emphasis upon the relationship of Sol with her, the fact that it is the warmth of his sunlight that makes her as productive as she is.[14]

The similarities between the present reverse depicting a charioteer apparently about to launch his chariot off the top of a mountain and that depicting Sol driving his chariot up a bank of clouds over a reclining Tellus are immediately obvious, and encourage the assumption that they depict the same basic scene. Both seem to focus on the relationship of Sol with the earth beneath him. However, there are two important differences. The first lies in the symbol chosen to represent the earth. In one case, the earth is represented by a mountain adorned with thriving plant and animal life. In the other case, it is represented by a female personification holding a cornucopia. The choice of the first symbol seems to place a more direct emphasis on the thriving nature of life on earth under the beneficent rays of the sun: the boar runs free in the sunlight, the two lizards bask contentedly in it, while the trees or bushes shoot upwards. The second difference lies in the size of Sol relative to the symbol of the earth beneath him. In one case, the symbol, the mountain adorned with life, dominates the scene, occupying about three times as much space as the apparent Sol and his chariot. In the other case, it is Sol in his chariot who dominates the scene, occupying about three times as much space as the female personification symbolising the earth. One could be forgiven, therefore, for assuming that both reverse types serve to convey the same basic message, that Sol blesses the earth with his light and warmth, but that one is simply more effective than the other in conveying this message. However, due consideration of the significance of the accompanying legend will suggest a very different interpretation of the reverse of the present medallion.

The Interpretation of the Legend TSOF

One may now turn to the problem of how to read the legend **TSOF** depicted above the heads of the horses pulling Sol's chariot over the mountain apparently symbolising the earth. Since there is no punctuation between the letters which are spaced equally apart from one another, it is not clear how they actually relate to one another. However, they cannot be read to spell one word alone in either Latin or Greek. Furthermore, since neither Latin nor Greek contains any word beginning with ts-, it is clear that the legend does not abbreviate a mere two words either, the first

[13] For the period before Commodus, see e.g. *RRC* nos 250/1, 309/1; *RIC* 2, Hadrian nos 167-68.

[14] J.M.C. Toynbee, *Roman Medallions* (New York, 1944), p. 93, claims that 'The primary allusion is surely to Sol as disposer of the agricultural year— *anno qui solstitiali circumagitur orbe*, with a secondary reference, it may be to the Emperor, who could take the place of Sol, metaphorically, and mediate his gifts to the world.' She introduces the notion of the agricultural year here simply because Tellus appears with personifications of the four seasons on other medallions of Commodus, but their absence here tells against any specific reference to a yearly cycle.

beginning with ts-, the second with of-. On the whole, therefore, it seems most likely that this legend abbreviates four different words beginning with **T**, **S**, **O** and **F**.

While there are many exceptions, one normally expects the legends on coins to refer in some way to the designs that they accompany.[15] In this case, therefore, three main possibilities suggest themselves. One possibility, suggested both by the position of the sequence **TSOF** immediately above the heads of the horses and the coincidence between the number of letters and the number of horses, is that the letters abbreviate the names of the horses. According to Ovid (d. c.AD 17), the names of Sol's horses were Pyroïs ('Fiery'), Eoüs ('Of the morning'), Aethon ('Blazing'), and Phlegon ('Burning'), but he simply transliterates these names from Greek into Latin rather than properly translating them.[16] In Latin, these names would probably be *Igneus*, *Oriens*, *Ardens*, and *Flagrans*, or similar. According to Hyginus (d. AD 17), however, drawing on the work of Eumelus of Corinth, the four horses were actually called Eoüs ('Of the morning'), Aethops ('Flaming'), Bronte ('Thunder'), and Sterope ('Lightning'), the last three of which he translates into Latin as *Flammeus*, *Tonitrua*, and *Fulgitrua* in that order.[17] Despite this variety of possible names, however, one cannot easily identify four names in the same language whose initials would produce the sequence **TSOF**. Furthermore, one has to wonder why the engraver would have identified the horses in this way while failing to identify their rider, or the accompanying horses-and-riders, in the same way.

A second possibility is that the letters describe the scene as a whole rather than the names of the horses. If this is what they do, then the prominence of Sol apparently within the design suggests that the **S** of the sequence should probably abbreviate his name. Furthermore, since the grammatical subject of the sentence occurs first and the verb last in normal word order in Latin, it seems not unreasonable to expect that the statement describes some activity or quality (**T**) of the sun (**S**) that acts (**F**) upon an object (**O**). In such a case, the verb (**F**) should describe some activity that benefits the earth. Possible verbs include *favere* 'to show favour to', *fovere* 'to make or keep warm', and *fortunare* 'to make fortunate'. As to the activity or quality of the sun that benefits the earth, this could refer to its *temperamentum* 'moderation', its *tepor* 'mild heat, warmth', or, bearing in mind that the scene apparently depicts the movement of the chariot of the sun across the sky, its *transitus* 'passage'. Then, the object of the sun's actions may be identifiable either as the *orbs* 'globe (of the earth)' or *omnes* 'all (living things)'. It is possible, therefore, that **TSOF** could abbreviate some statement such as *Transitus solis omnes fovet* 'The passage of the sun warms all' in precise description of the scene depicted below it. In support of this interpretation, one notes that this was a commonplace idea, so there is nothing surprising about such an expansion, or something similar. For example, the poet Lucretius (d. c.55

[15] One obvious exception is when a short legend serves some administrative or technical function, such as a mint-mark. In another context, one might be tempted to interpret the sequence **OF** in abbreviation of the term *officina* 'workshop' so that the legend as a whole refers to the workshop of someone with initials **T** and **S**. However, since no other medallions of this period include a mint-mark in this way, this does not seem likely in this case.

[16] Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2.153-54.

[17] Hyginus, *Fabulae* 183.

BC) declared that 'unless the sun for its part warms them and grants them heat, the crops, trees, and living things cannot grow.'[18] The main argument against such an interpretation, however, is that this expansion of the letters seems rather random with too many potential variables, so that it does not seem reasonable to have expected anyone to be able to read them in exactly the way that they were intended to be read.



Fig. 5. Denarius of Carausius (19mm (2x), 3.70g); *RIC* - . Ex Roma Numismatics, Auction 7 (22 March 2014), lot 1230. © Roma Numismatics Ltd.

A third possibility is that the letters abbreviate some statement that complements the whole scene in some way rather than simply describing it. As an example of what I mean here, one should consider the use of the legend **RSR** in the exergue on the reverse of so many different types of coins, principally silver, struck by the usurper Carausius (286-93) (**Fig. 5**). This legend had long been considered as some form of mintmark before it was finally realised that it abbreviates the phrase *redeunt Saturnia regna* 'Saturnian kingdoms return', half a line of poetry from the fourth eclogue by Virgil, and that it was used as part of a concerted effort by Carausius to represent his rule as a new golden age.[19] If one searches in similar vein for a phrase from a famous Latin poet that seems relevant to a depiction of the chariot of the sun speeding over the earth and could be abbreviated by the letters **TSOF**, one does indeed find one. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid attributes the following words to Tellus as she complains to Jupiter about the damage caused by Phaethon, the son of Helios, as he drove his father's chariot too low across the earth and burned all beneath him:[20]

"si placet hoc meruique, quid o tua fulmina cessant,
summe deum? liceat periturae viribus ignis
igne perire tuo clademque auctore levare!
vix equidem fauces haec ipsa in verba resolvo";
(presserat ora vapor) "tostos en adspice crines
inque oculis tantum, ***t****antum* ***s****uper* ***o****ra* ***f****avillae!"*

[18] Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 1.807-08: *solque sua pro parte* ***fovet*** *tribuitque calorem, / crescere non possint fruges arbusta animantes*.

[19] See G. de la Bédoyère, 'Carausius and the marks RSR and I.N.P.C.D.A.', *NC* 158 (1998), pp. 79-88. More generally, see G. Barker, 'The coinage of Carausius: developing the golden age ideology through the saecular games', *NC* 175 (2015), pp. 161-70.

[20] Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2.279-84. Text and translation from F.J. Miller, revised by G.P. Goold, *Ovid: Metamorphoses, Books 1-8*, Loeb Classical Library 42 (Cambridge, MA, 1977), pp. 78-81.

> "If this is thy will, and I have deserved all this, why, O king of all the gods, are thy lightnings idle? If I must die by fire, oh, let me perish by thy fire and lighten my suffering by thought of him who sent it. I scarce can open my lips to speak these words" — the hot smoke was choking her— "See my singed hair and all ashes in my eyes, all ashes over my face!"

The final half-line, *tantum super ora favillae,* perhaps better translated as 'So many ashes over (my) face!' expands the sequence **TSOF** in a way that seems to suit the broad context here, although the acceptance of this would mean that the driver of the chariot is actually identifiable as Phaethon rather than Sol. Three main arguments may be adduced in support of this interpretation of these letters. The first is that the fact that the chariot is depicted touching the top of the mountain rather than gliding high above it supports the identification of its driver as Phaethon rather than Sol. The second is the fact that Commodus is depicted as Jupiter with a prominent thunderbolt on the obverse, because, according to the myth, Jupiter did finally strike Phaethon from the sky with a thunderbolt in response to the pleas of Tellus and others to act before any further damage was caused. Finally, the more literate readers of the reverse might reasonably have been expected to recognise the sequence **TSOF** as an abbreviation of a line from Ovid's description of the death of Phaethon once they had begun to consider the possibility that the accompanying scene depicted Phaethon rather than Sol, such was the popularity of his work subsequently.[21] Here one should not ignore the possibility that the present medallion was but one of a larger group whose designs and legends mutually reinforced one another, so that the significance of both design and legend were much clearer in this fuller context.[22]

The main argument against this reading of the letters **TSOF** must be that the mountain beneath the chariot does not reveal any evidence of heat damage: no fallen trees, blazing fires, bones or anything of that nature. On the contrary, as already noted, it appears to depict an abundance of life. But perhaps the scene depicts the mountain as it was still in the split-second before Phaethon descended upon it, and the accompanying legend was intended to signal what happened next in a further unfolding of the scene rather than to describe the mountain as it presently was. Indeed, one could argue that there is a simple form of narrative here proceeding from the design on the reverse, which depicts the chariot of the sun striking a mountain top, to the accompanying legend, which quotes the complaint of Tellus as she is burned by the chariot of the sun, to the design on the obverse, which depicts Jupiter with a thunderbolt such as he finally used to strike Phaethon dead.

[21] On the popularity of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* even relatively soon after his death, see e.g. P.E. Knox, 'Ovidian themes on Pompeian walls', in J.F. Miller and C.E. Newlands, *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid* (Chichester, 2014), pp. 36-54; L. Graverini, 'Ovidian graffiti: love, genre and gender on a wall in Pompeii. A new study of *CIL* IV 5296 - *CLE* 950', *Incontri di filologia classica* 12 (2012-2013), pp. 1-28. His work remained popular long afterwards, even into the 5th century AD. See e.g. I. Fielding, *Transformations of Ovid in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2017). On the dominant influence subsequently of his description of the myth of Phaethon in particular, see L. Cuppo Csaki, *The Influence of Ovid's Phaethon*, PhD dissertation, Fordham University, 1995.

[22] The strongest argument in support of the reading of the legend **RSR** on the coinage of Carausius as *redeunt Saturnia regna* lies in the fact that a bronze medallion of Carausius also bears the legend **I.N.P.C.D.A** in abbreviation of the very next line in the same poem, *Iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto*.

As one reviews the various possibilities outlined above, the expansion of **TSOF** as a half-line from Ovid describing the death of Phaethon seems the most plausible explanation that best fits the full range of evidence. One can hardly dismiss as mere coincidence the fact that a half-line from a section of poetry describing the complaints of Tellus as she is burned by the low passage of the chariot of the sun when driven by Phaethon perfectly expands a group of letters set above a depiction of the chariot of the sun scrambling over a mountain top. Unfortunately, no other coin or medallion seems ever to have depicted Phaethon, so one cannot compare this reverse type to any other numismatic treatment of the same subject. Indeed, this fact may well explain the novelty of the reverse design here. The engraver could not imitate some standard numismatic depiction of Phaethon because this simply did not exist. The design was not repeated later either because this particular myth did not easily lend itself to imperial propaganda. Most of the mythological figures depicted on the coinage were gods or heroes depicted there precisely because of their identity as powerful beings with whom the emperors wished to associate themselves in order to share in their glory. However, no-one would have wished to associate himself with Phaethon, a mere mortal, and a tragic failure to boot.[23] It is not particularly surprising, therefore, that relatively few ancient depictions of Phaethon seem to have survived in any artistic medium.[24] Of those that do survive, however, most prefer to emphasize the fall of Phaethon from the chariot of the sun after Jupiter had struck him with a thunderbolt. For example, this forms the main scene on a group of sarcophagi roughly contemporary with the present medallion.[25] If one questions why the artist responsible for the present reverse type did not depict Phaethon in the same way, but chose rather to depict him scrambling across a mountain top instead, the answer may lie with Ovid once more and his vivid catalogue of the numerous mountains that Phaethon burned as he drove too low across the earth.[26]

Conclusion

The reverse of this newly discovered bimetallic medallion of Commodus presents the modern viewer with a number of different problems. It almost certainly has nothing to do with Mt Argaeus or any cult there, but it is not easy to determine what exactly it was intended to depict. On the whole, the best explanation may be that it depicts Phaethon descending too near the earth in the chariot of the sun, not least because the accompanying legend seems to abbreviate a half-line from Ovid's description of this event. If this interpretation is correct, however, Commodus probably intended more by his choice of design on this medallion than simply to entertain the recipients with a beautifully depicted scene from a famous myth. There is an obvious political message here also concerning his own position and power, that, just like Jupiter, he could also strike down anyone, no matter how powerful or well-born they were, son of a god or not. Hence the recipients of this medallion received a subtle warning concerning their future behaviour as well as a valuable keepsake.

[23] According to Suetonius (*Caligula* 11), the aged emperor Tiberius had perceptively declared that his successor Caligula would be a Phaethon to the world, that is, a cause of great harm.

[24] See *LIMC* VII.1 (Zurich/Munich, 1994), pp. 350-54, and VII.2, pls. 311-13.

[25] See P. Zanker and B.C. Ewald, *Living with Myths: The Imagery of Roman Sarcophagi* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 80-83.

[26] Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2.216-26.