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## Postumus and the Three Suns: Neglected Numismatic Evidence for a Solar Halo

by

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# Postumus and the Three Suns: Neglected Numismatic Evidence for a Solar Halo

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**[PLATE 6]**[1]

Postumus rebelled against the emperor Gallienus in late 260, and ruled a break-away 'Gallic empire' until his own troops murdered him in 269.[2] His coinage included an aureus of unique reverse type whose production has been dated to the autumn of 261 (**Pl. 6, 1**).[3] This reverse depicts three draped and radiate busts in a row, with the centre bust facing forward while the two busts on either side face sideways towards it. The accompanying legend reads **AETERNITAS AUG**. In a slight variation of earlier commentators, Webb favoured identifying the bust in the centre as Postumus' wife, and the two busts to the sides as his sons, and derived the type from the reverse of an aureus of Septimius Severus which depicts a forward-facing bust of his wife Julia Domna between the sideways-facing busts of their two sons Caracalla and Geta, with the legend **FELICITAS SAECULI** (**Pl. 6, 2**).[4] It is now accepted that the reverse actually depicts three busts of Sol. But why depict three busts of Sol together when, as far as the Romans knew anyway, there was only one sun? Postumus himself only ever depicted a single Sol in his representations of this god elsewhere on his coinage.[5] Nor had anyone else ever depicted more than a single Sol, whatever the medium.[6] Schulte tentatively suggested that the three busts of Sol were intended to represent the three main regions of Postumus' empire – Gaul, Spain and Britain – and that the design may have owed something to the older depiction of the three provinces of Gaul by means of three busts such as Galba had once depicted on a denarius (**Pl. 6, 3**).[7] However, there are several weaknesses with this interpretation.

[1] For permission to reproduce the photographs, I thank the BM (**Plate 6, 1-6, 8**) and Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. (**Plate 6, 7**).

[2] In general, see J.F. Drinkwater, *The Gallic Empire: Separatism and Continuity in the North-Western Provinces of the Roman Empire AD 260-274*, Historia Einzelschriften 52 (Stuttgart, 1987), pp. 19-44.

[3] See B. Schulte, *Die Goldprägung der gallischen Kaiser von Postumus bis Tetricus*, Typos 4 (Aarau, 1983), pp. 29-30, on his Postumus nos 16a-18a (**Pl. 6, 1** = Schulte, Postumus no. 18). This reverse type occurs with two obverses, a laureate bust facing either right or left.

[4] See P.H. Webb, *RIC* 5, Part II, p. 333, on his Postumus no. 18. For the aureus of Septimius Severus, see *RIC* 4, Septimius Severus nos 181a-c (**Pl. 6, 2** = *RIC* 4, Septimius Severus no. 181b). H. Cohen, *Description historique des monnaies frappées sous l'Empire Romain* VI, 2nd edition (Paris, 1886), pp. 15-16, favours P. Dupré, 'Nouvelles observations sur la médaille attribuée à Postume fils', *RN* 1846, pp. 20-27, at 25-27, who identified the two outermost busts as the son and daughter of Postumus. Both Webb and Dupré were reacting against an earlier interpretation identifying the two outermost busts with Postumus elder and Postumus younger.

[5] See *RIC* 5, Postumus nos 31, 77, 152, 260-61, 316-17, 336.

[6] On the iconography of Sol in general, see *LIMC* IV, Part I, pp. 592-625.

[7] Schulte, *Die Goldprägung*, p. 30. For the denarius of Galba, see *RIC*$^2$1, Galba nos 89-92 (**Pl. 6, 3** = *RIC*$^2$1, Galba no. 92). Schulte's interpretation is followed by e.g. S. Berrens, *Sonnenkult und Kaisertum von der Severern bis zu Constantin I. (193-337 n. Chr.)*, Historia Einzelschriften 185 (Stuttgart, 2004), p. 82.

First, personifications of regions or provinces were always female, whereas Sol was a male god. So, for example, when his coins hail Postumus as **RESTITUTOR GALLIARUM** 'Restorer of the Gauls', they depict him raising a kneeling woman.[8] Second, there is no attempt to distinguish between the three busts of Sol by means of different attributes such as one might normally associate with any of these regions. Next, there was no tradition of identifying Sol as the special patron of one or more of these regions. On the contrary, it was the universality of his rule that was normally stressed by giving him titles such as **PACATOR ORBIS**.[9] Finally, if the three busts of Sol had represented the three main regions within Postumus' empire, it would have been divisive to depict two of the busts facing sideways towards the centre bust as if to pay honour to him. Here one notes the contrast with the busts representing the *tres Galliae* on Galba's denarius, all depicted facing in the same direction so that no single province seems to receive the honour of her companions.

The purpose of the present article is to propose a new interpretation of this reverse type as an alternative to that offered by Schulte. Here one notes that while the Romans believed that there was only one sun, they had long been familiar with a certain phenomenon by which they sometimes seemed to see three suns in the sky. In his *Natural History* which he completed in AD 77, Pliny the Elder describes this phenomenon as follows:

> 'Again, several suns are seen at once, neither above nor below the real sun but at an angle with it, never alongside of nor opposite to the earth, and not at night but either at sunrise or at sunset. It is also reported that once several suns were seen at midday at the Bosphorus, and that these lasted from dawn till sunset. In former times three suns have often been seen at once, for example in the consulships of Spurius Postumius and Quintus Mucius [174 BC], of Quintus Marcius and Marcus Porcius [118BC], of Marcus Antonius and Publius Dolabella [44 BC], and of Marcus Lepidus and Lucius Plancus [42 BC]; and our generation saw this during the principate of his late majesty Claudius, in his consulship, when Cornelius Orfitus was his colleague [AD 51]. It is not stated that more than three suns at a time have ever been seen hitherto.'[10]

As is well known now, this phenomenon describes a so-called solar halo caused by the refraction of sunlight through ice-crystals in the upper atmosphere.[11] In the most common form of this phenomenon, the sun is surrounded by a single halo, a vertical pillar of light passes through the sun, and two mock suns, often called 'sun dogs', but

[8] *RIC* 5, Postumus nos 82, 157, 223.

[9] See e.g. *RIC* 4, Septimius Severus no. 282, Caracalla no. 163, Geta no. 50; *RIC* 5, Postumus no. 317.

[10] Pliny, *NH* 2.99: *Et rursus soles plures simul cernuntur, nec supra ipsum nec infra, sed ex obliquo, numquam iuxta nec contra terram, nec noctu sed aut oriente aut occidente. Semel et meridie conspecti in Bosporo produntur, qui ab matutino tempore duraverunt in occasum. Trinos soles antiqui saepius videre, sicut Sp. Postumio Q. Mucio et Q. Marcio M. Porcio et M. Antonio P. Dolabella et M. Lepido L. Planco coss., et nostra aetas vidit divo Claudio principe, consulatu eius Cornelio Orfito collega. Plures quam tres simul visi ad hoc aevi numquam produntur*. Text and translation from H. Rackham, *Pliny: Natural History* I, Loeb Classical Library 330 (Cambridge, Mass., 1949), 242-3.

[11] In general, see R. Greenler, *Rainbows, Halos, and Glories* (Cambridge, 1980); W. Tape, *Atmospheric Halos*, Antarctic Research Series 64 (Washington, DC, 1994).

technically known as *parhelia*, form on the same horizontal axis as the sun itself, just outside the halo. The overall effect is that of three suns in a row, a large central sun with a weaker, smaller sun on either side. Hence the number and relative positions of the three busts of Sol on the aureus of Postumus correspond exactly to what one would expect in the case of a single-ring solar halo. The three busts of Sol form a horizontal row as do the apparent three suns in the case of a solar halo, the facing central bust corresponding to the real sun in the centre, and the two busts facing sideways towards the central bust to the apparent weaker suns, the *parhelia*.

This celebration of the occurrence of a solar halo on the coinage would certainly have been unusual, but not necessarily unique. One notes that the apparent appearance of three suns in the sky had usually been treated as an omen of some sort, and noted accordingly.[12] In particular, political leaders had normally tried to place the best possible interpretations for themselves on such omens. For example, in the case of the occurrence of this phenomenon in 44 BC, the then Octavian, or his supporters, seem to have been quick to claim it as an omen in his favour, since it occurred at the time of his entry into Rome from Apollonia.[13] One of the three suns was said to have been surrounded by a fiery crown, and this was subsequently interpreted as an omen predicting Octavian's emergence as the sole ruler from his shared triumviral rule with Mark Antony and Lepidus. This was clearly a normal single-ring halo where the coincidence between the number of suns and the number within the triumvirate, combined with the fact that the ring was centred on only one of the suns, the real sun in the centre, to encourage the belief that this had been an omen pointing to the emergence of a sole leader from among the triumvirs. Whatever the case, the fact that the mint accompanying Mark Antony on his travels issued three types depicting Sol on the reverse in 42 BC suggests that he tried to appropriate the solar halo of that year as a sign in his favour in order to counteract the success enjoyed by Octavian's efforts to interpret the solar halo of 44 BC as a sign favourable to him.[14] The reverses of two of Antony's types depicted a radiate head of Sol in profile as their main object in an entirely traditional manner.[15] However, the reverse of one depicted a distyle temple seeming to contain what has often been described as a 'medallion' or 'disk' bearing a radiate bust of Sol; the accompanying legend referred merely

[12] On solar phenomena as omens, see F.B. Krauss, *An Interpretation of the Omens, Portents, and Prodigies Recorded by Livy, Tacitus, and Suetonius* (Philadelphia, 1930), pp. 67-71.

[13] Dio 45.17.5; Julius Obsequens 68 (44BC). Dio records that this phenomenon, along with many other apparent omens, was discussed in the senate at a meeting held for three successive days, including New Year's Day 43 BC. Hence the sources agree in dating this event to 44 BC. Cf. Velleius Paterculus 2.59; Dio 45.4.4. Suet. *Augustus* 95.

[14] On the solar halo of 42 BC, see Julius Obsequens 70: *soles tres circiter hora tertia diei visi, mox in unum orbem contracti*. Cf. Dio 47.40.2. Sol also featured prominently on the coinage issued by the moneyers at Rome that year. See *RRC* nos 494, 20a-b, 21, 43a-b. The relevance of the solar halo of 42 BC to the prominence afforded Sol on the coinage of that year has been strangely neglected in favour of interpreting this emphasis either as a reference to the imminence of a new age or to the expected liberation of the East from the assassins of Caesar. See e.g. D.R. Sear, *The History and Coinage of the Roman Imperators 49-27BC* (London, 1998), pp. 85-7; B. Woytek, *Arma et Nummi: Forschungen zur römischen Finanzgeschichte und Münzprägung der Jahre 49 bis 42 v. Chr.* (Vienna, 2003), pp. 487-9.

[15] *RRC* nos 496, 2-3. For earlier depictions of Sol in this manner, see *RRC* nos 303, 1 (109/108 BC); 390, 1 (76 BC); 437, 1a-b (51 BC); 463, 4a-d (46 BC); 474, 5 (45 BC).

to Antony's position as triumvir (**Pl. 6, 4**).[16] This design was without precedent, a fact that suggests that it commemorated something unusual.[17] Two features point towards commemoration of a solar halo. First, the so-called 'medallion' or 'disk' seems designed to convey the appearance of a ring of light, a key feature of a solar halo, and was in fact a standard iconographic attribute of the sun, normally described as a nimbus. Second, the depiction of this bust of Sol in association with a temple represents an attempt to set the appearance of a solar halo in a precise topographical context exactly as in Livy's description of how an arc was seen extending over the temple of Saturn in Rome in 174 BC, and three suns shone at once, in other words how the upper half of what we would now call a solar halo was seen above the temple.[18] Hence it is arguable that Postumus' coin celebrated the occurrence of a solar halo with an attempt to depict what had been celebrated on at least one earlier coin issue, in 42 BC.

While the poor nature of our surviving sources for the late first and second centuries AD do not allow us to construct as full a list of alleged omens as we possess for the late Republican period, Dio preserves a notice recording the occurrence of a solar halo at Rome during the reign of Didius Julianus in 193. In this, he describes the appearance of three 'stars' about the sun, which was interpreted as a prediction of the death of Didius Julianus, and of the start of a civil war among Severus, Niger, and Albinus.[19] The soldiers kept pointing at the omen, while Dio and his senatorial colleagues were too afraid to do anything but steal quick glances at it, so proving that this phenomenon continued to be treated with the same shock or awe that it had always been. Here one notes that Septimius Severus suddenly began to celebrate Sol on his coinage in 197, and it is tempting to assume that he did so because his victory over Albinus that year now proved that he was indeed the man whose final victory had been predicted by the solar halo in 193.[20] In the light of such evidence, therefore, it is legitimate to suggest that Postumus, or his supporters, would have been sufficiently impressed by the occurrence of a solar halo to want to celebrate it on the coinage in much the same way that Mark Antony seems to have done in 42 BC or Septimius Severus in 197.

One turns next to the significance of the associated legend, **AETERNITAS AUG**, on Postumus' coin. If one accepts Schulte's dating of his gold coinage, Postumus had issued earlier in 261 an aureus whose reverse proclaimed **AETERNITAS AUG** around a depiction of Hercules crowning him with a wreath, a type clearly intended

[16] *RRC* no. 496, 1.

[17] It was imitated on a type issued at Buthrotum in Epirus under Augustus. See *RPC* I, 1383. D.W. Roller, 'The lost building program of Marcus Antonius', *L'Antiquité Classique* 76 (2007), pp. 89-98, at p. 90, suggests that the temple may be identifiable with the temple to Julius Caesar begun in 42 BC.

[18] Livy 41.21.12-13: *arcus interdiu sereno caelo super aedem Saturni in foro Romano intentus, et tres simul soles effulserunt*.

[19] Dio 73.14.4. In this case, two of the 'stars' constitute weak *parhelia*, while the third is best explained by the fact that a third area of intensive light often occurs directly above the sun where the sun pillar seems to intersect the halo.

[20] See *RIC* 4 Septimius Severus nos 101, 102, 115, 489. For a recently discovered aureus of the same year with Sol, see J.H.C. Williams, 'Septimius Severus and Sol, Carausius and Oceanus: two new Roman acquisitions at the British Museum; *NC* 159 (1999), pp. 307-13, at 307-10.

to proclaim the eternal rule of his dynasty.[21] The obvious interpretation, therefore, of the presence of the same legend on the reverse with the three busts of Sol is that it was intended to proclaim the same thing, that is, that the solar halo had been interpreted as a sign of the eternal reign of Postumus' dynasty. One notes here that there was a longstanding association between the god Sol and the concept of eternity in that the personification Aeternitas had often been depicted holding busts of both Sol and Luna in her hands in apparent reference to the passing of time as measured by day and night (**Pl. 6, 5**).[22] Furthermore, by the third century emperors were even dispensing with a separate personification of Aeternitas altogether and associating this legend with the standing figure of Sol instead (**Pl. 6, 6**).[23] It is in this context, therefore, that Postumus sought to explain the apparent appearance of several suns, symbols of the passing of time and traditional attributes of Aeternitas, as an omen of eternal rule.

It is important here to draw attention to the fact that probably the most famous occurrence of a solar halo in the ancient world was also interpreted as a sign of extended rule. There is widespread agreement now that the pagan and Christian accounts of a vision that Constantine I saw sometime before his decisive victory at the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 probably refer to the same phenomenon that he experienced while travelling through Gaul in 310, a solar halo.[24] The author of an anonymous panegyric delivered before Constantine himself at Trier in late 310 described his experience as follows:

> 'Fortune herself so ordered this matter that the happy outcome of your affairs prompted you to convey to the immortal gods what you had vowed at that very spot where you had turned aside towards the most beautiful temple in the whole world, or rather, to the deity made manifest, as you saw. For you saw,

[21] Schulte, *Die Goldprägung*, p. 28, on his Postumus no. 8a. See *RIC* 5, Postumus no. 17.

[22] See e.g. *RIC*[2] 2, Vespasian nos 838-39, 856, 866-67; Domitian nos 366, 375-76, 411. Also *RIC* 2, Trajan nos 91-92, 229-31, 241-42; Hadrian nos 38 (**Pl. 6, 5**), 48, 81, 114, 597a-d, 744. However, the use of Sol and Luna as symbols of eternity dates back at least to the 1st century BC: see S. Hijmans, 'Sol and Luna in the *Carmen Saeculare*: an iconographic perspective', in M. Zimmerman and R. van der Paardt (eds), *Metamorphic Reflections: Essays Presented to Ben Hijmans at his 75th Birthday* (Leuven, 2004), pp. 201-24. In general on the iconography of Aeternitas, see *LIMC* I, Part I, pp. 244-9. See also R. Etienne, '*Aeternitas Augusti – aeternitas imperii*: quelques aperçus', in *Les grandes figures religieuses. Fonctionnement pratique et symbolique dans l'antiquité. Rencontre international, Besançon 25-26 avril 1984* (Paris, 1986), pp. 445-54.

[23] See *RIC* 4, Gordian III nos 83, 97 (**Pl. 6, 6**), 98, 109, 111, 117, 297; Philip II nos 90, 112, 137, 226. Also *RIC* 5, Valerian nos 66, 228-29, 232; Gallienus nos 24, 60, 99, 160, 302, 348, 373, 465, 555, 629-30; Claudius nos 16-17, 115, 270; Quintillus nos 7, 40; Aurelian nos 20, 44. For Diana (moon goddess) and Sol together as symbols of eternity, see *RIC* 5, Claudius no. 198.

[24] See P. Weiss, 'The Vision of Constantine', *JRA* 16 (2003), pp. 237-59. For a summary of the reception of Weiss' arguments, see T.D. Barnes, *Constantine: Dynasty, Religion, and Power in the Late Roman Empire* (Chichester, 2011), pp. 74-6. Solar halos continued to be seen throughout the fourth century, but Christian witnesses now emphasized the cross shape formed by the intersection of the central pillar of light with the horizontal containing the three suns rather than the fact that there seemed to be three suns. See J.W. Drijvers, 'The power of the cross: celestial cross appearances in the fourth century', in A. Cain and N. Lenski (eds), *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 237-48.

> I believe, O Constantine, your Apollo, accompanied by Victory, offering you laurel wreaths, each one of which carries a portent of thirty years. For this is the number of human ages which are owed to you without fail – beyond the old age of a Nestor.'[25]

There is some room for dispute about how long a life this omen signified. If the wreaths are identifiable as halo rings, and the plural can be trusted, then clearly the promise is of some multiple of thirty years.[26] If, however, the plural is a generalising plural, a deliberate exaggeration on the part of someone who was, after all, a panegyrist rather than a historian or scientific writer, then one should probably limit the promise to a mere thirty years.[27] The key point here is that the author, who was presumably following the official version of events rather than striking out on some novel interpretation of his own, interpreted this halo as a sign of extended life, and therefore rule, exactly as the designer of Postumus' reverse seems to have done.

It is noteworthy that, although Constantine's apparent experience of a solar halo resulted in the sudden emergence of Sol as the dominant figure on his coinage, where it remained so until into 319, the various reverse types were almost entirely traditional, depicting either a single bust of Sol or a standing Sol with chlamys and globe.[28] The only real novelty was the reverse of a follis issued only at Thessalonica in c.319 which showed Sol standing at the centre of what appears to be a series of four overlaid or interlocking Xs, now interpreted as a radiate cross in direct reference to the vision of 310 (**Pl. 6, 7**).[29] Of greater interest here, however, is the depiction of Constantine's new standard, the *labarum*, allegedly adopted as a result of his vision, on the reverse of a follis issued only at Constantinople in *c*.327-8 (**Pl. 6, 8**).[30] The square flag on the *labarum* displays three medallions whose precise interpretation remains unclear. Eusebius of Caesarea describes how a *labarum* which Constantine

[25] *Pan. Lat*. 6[7].21.4: *ipsa hoc sic ordinante Fortuna ut te ibi rerum tuarum felicitas admoneret dis immortalibus ferre quae voveras, ubi deflexisses ad templum toto orbe pulcherrimum, immo ad praesentem, ut vidisti, deum. Vidisti enim, credo, Constantine, Apollinem tuum comitante Victoria coronas tibi laureas offerentem, quae tricenum singulae ferunt omnem annorum. Hic est enim humanarum numerus aetatum quae tibi utique debenture ultra Pyliam senectutem*. Text and translation from C.E.V. Nixon and B.S. Rodgers, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini*, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 21 (Berkeley, 1994), pp. 248-50, 583. It is interesting to note that Constantine seems to have witnessed the solar halo in association with a visit to a temple, reminiscent of the association of the solar halos of 174 BC and 42 BC with a temple.

[26] Barnes, *Constantine*, p. 78, interprets it to promise a life of 120 years. Following Weiss, he seems to interpret the halo as a double-ring halo – hence the reference to wreaths in the plural. He then counts four concentrations of light – the sun, two *parhelia*, and the bright spot on the inner halo directly above the sun – at thirty years each.

[27] I suggest that Constantine only experienced a normal single-ring halo, in which case he simply counted the three suns alone – the real sun and the two *parhelia* – at a value of 10 years each to reach a figure of 30 years in total, a figure originally interpreted in reference to his reign rather than to his life.

[28] See P. Bruun, 'The disappearance of Sol from the coins of Constantine', *Arctos* 2 (1958), pp. 15-37.

[29] *RIC* 7, Thessalonica nos 66-71 (**Pl. 6, 7** = *RIC* 7, Thessalonica no. 66). See Weiss, 'The vision', p. 251.

[30] *RIC* 7, Constantinople nos 19 (**Pl. 6, 8**), 26. On the creation of the *labarum*, see Eusebius of Caesarea, *Vita Constantini* 1.29-30.

I had once shown to him displayed portraits of the emperor and his sons. As a result, it is tempting to assume that these medallions had been intended to depict portraits of the emperor and his two Caesars by 327, Constantine II and Constantius II.[31] However, the possibility that they had been intended to represent the three suns of his original solar vision in 310, that is, that the labarum had depicted three busts of Sol in a row exactly as on Postumus' aureus, deserves equal consideration. The form of the *labarum* need not have been totally Christianized by 327, nor every trace of Constantine's former solar cult totally eradicated by then.[32]

In a context where Sol had effectively replaced Aeternitas as the symbol of eternal rule, it becomes clearer why Postumus and Constantine each interpreted a solar halo in the way that they did, as a chronological sign, in contrast to the contemporary political interpretation that had been apparently been placed upon the same phenomenon in both 44 BC and 193. It must also be said, however, that neither Postumus nor Constantine would have found it easy to place the same sort of political interpretation upon the solar halos that their reigns had witnessed as had been placed upon these earlier occurrences. If one can assume that Postumus issued his new reverse type shortly after the occurrence of the solar halo which it commemorates, then one should probably date the occurrence of that halo to the summer or autumn of 261. At that time, there were probably three other emperors, Gallienus holding Italy and the Balkans, and Macrianus holding the East with his brother Quietus. Hence it would not have been easy to apply a contemporary political explanation to the appearance of three suns in a situation where there were actually four emperors, unless Macrinus and Quietus could be counted as one. A similar difficulty must have arisen when Constantine experienced his vision in 310, since he shared the empire with four others at that time, Maxentius, Licinius, Galerius Maximianus, and Maximinus.[33] The more interesting question, perhaps, concerns the reason why both Postumus and Constantine paid so much more attention to this phenomenon than had many of their imperial predecessors, even to the extent of commemorating it on their coinage. For not only did Claudius fail to commemorate the solar halo witnessed at Rome in 51 on his coinage, but one may assume that several other halos had surely also been witnessed there before that recorded in 193. The answer to this presumably lies in the rapid development of the cult of Sol during the third century so that what had previously merited some attention as just one among many other forms of omen was transformed into a key sign from a god increasingly recognized as one of the greatest

[31] See A. Cameron and S.G. Hall, *Eusebius: Life of Constantine* (Oxford, 1999), p. 212. M. Faintich, *Astronomical Symbols on Ancient and Medieval Coins* (Jefferson, 2008), pp. 112-14, argues that they represent three planets, building upon the arguments of M. DiMaio, J. Zeuge, and N. Zotov, '*Ambiguitas Constantiniana*: the *Caeleste Signum Dei* of Constantine the Great', *Byzantion* 58 (1988), pp. 333-60, that what Constantine really saw was an unusual conjunction of planets in the night sky.

[32] See M. Wallraf, 'Constantine's devotion to the Sun after 324', *Studia Patristica* 34 (2001), pp. 256-69.

[33] For this purpose, it is irrelevant whether the other emperors recognized Maxentius as such. For the college of emperors then, see T.D. Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), p. 6.

of all the gods, if not the greatest.[34] Here one notes that Postumus' coinage reveals that his primary devotion was to Hercules, although under several different guises.[35] Nevertheless, it also reveals increased interest in the cult of Sol. Finally, none of the surviving literary sources for the reign of Postumus suggest that he experienced any sort of divine vision during his reign. However, this is not particularly surprising given the nature of these sources, epitomes or historical surveys whose main focus often lies elsewhere.[36]

In conclusion, Postumus' unique reverse type depicting three draped and radiate busts of Sol is best interpreted as a reference to an apparent appearance of three suns, a not uncommon meteorological phenomenon identifiable as a solar halo. Indeed, Mark Antony seems to have celebrated the same phenomenon on his coinage in 42 BC, although in a rather different way, as does Septimius Severus on his coinage in 197. However, none of these revealed the same extent of devotion to the cult of Sol on their subsequent coinage as Constantine did after his witness of a solar halo in 310. This may be because none of these personally witnessed the solar halo, although all were prepared to make some use of it subsequently for the sake of political propaganda. Whatever the reason, this reverse type preserves evidence of an important precursor to the Constantinian vision of 310, and provides an interesting supplement to our meagre literary sources for the reign of Postumus.

[34] On the development of the cult of Sol, see G.H. Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain 23 (Leiden, 1972). For a more critical approach, see S.E. Hijmans, 'The sun which did not rise in the East: the cult of Sol Invictus in the light of non-literary evidence', *Babesch* 71 (1996), pp. 115-150.

[35] On Postumus' religious interests as revealed by his coinage, see Drinkwater, *The Gallic Empire*, pp. 162-6.

[36] For the fullest accounts, see Zosimus 1.38; Zonaras 12.24; *Historia Augusta*, *Triginta Tyranni* 3. See Drinkwater, *The Gallic Empire*, pp. 45-91, for a full list of sources.

PLATE 6



1 2 3 4





5 6 7 8