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Commodus and Fortuna Manens

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## Commodus and Fortuna Manens

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*Abstract:* It is argued that, when the emperor Commodus struck coins with reverse legend celebrating Fortuna under the epithet Manens surrounding a unique depiction of her seated and holding a horse by the bridle, he may have done so in order to celebrate his lucky escape from a potentially fatal accident involving a horse.

The purpose of this note is to propose a new explanation of the celebration by the emperor Commodus (sole reign AD 180-92) of the goddess Fortuna Manens on his coinage in AD 189 when he struck the same reverse type in her honour on the aureus, the denarius (**Fig. 1**), the sestertius, and the as.<sup>1</sup> The reverse legends of the various denominations all include a reference to his fifth consulship in AD 186, which proves they were struck sometime between that year and his sixth consulship in AD 190. However, the reverse legend of the as also includes a reference to his tenure of tribunician power for the 14<sup>th</sup> time, suggesting that the whole group should probably be dated to AD 189 in particular. With the exception of the as, where the inclusion of the reference to the tribunician power forces the abbreviation of the title of the goddess to FORT MANENT, the various denominations refer to the goddess in full in the dative case, FORTVNAE MANENTI ‘To Abiding Fortune’, so there is no doubt as to her identity or the reading of her epithet. Commodus celebrated Fortuna under the entirely conventional epithets of either Redux (‘That brings back home’) or Felix (‘Propitious’) on other issues struck in her honour both before and after his coins struck in her honour as Manens, so that his devotion to her did not begin or end in that year.<sup>2</sup> However, his celebration of her as Manens was new and brief, brief enough to suggest a specific and time-limited reason for this unique celebration.

<sup>1</sup> See *MIR* 18, 751 = *RIC* 3, Commodus no. 191a (denarius); *MIR* 18, 752 = *RIC* 3, Commodus no. 547 (sestertius); *MIR* 18, 753 = *RIC* 3, Commodus no. 534 (as). The aureus seems to be known from only one specimen that has recently appeared on the market. See Numismatica Genevensis SA, Auction 4 (11 December 2006), lot 188 = Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 95 (6 October 2016), lot 299. Szaivert, *MIR* 18, pp. 224-5, dates this emission to the first half of AD 189.

<sup>2</sup> For the celebration of Fortuna Redux, see *MIR* 18, 472 (AD 180); 676 (AD 185); 689 (AD 186); 1135-36 (AD 189). For the celebration of Fortuna Felix, see *MIR* 18, 771-72, 781, 1129 (AD 189). For the celebration of Fortuna without name or epithet, see *MIR* 18, 491 (AD 180); 556 (AD 182); 565, 570-71 (AD 183); 599 (AD 184); 742 (AD 188); 839, 847 (AD 192).



**Fig. 1:** Denarius of Commodus celebrating Fortuna Manens, AD 189 (17 mm, 3.31g)(1.5x); *MIR* 18, 751. Reverse legend: FORTVNAE MANENTI C·V·P·P.  
Ex Roma Numismatics, E-Sale 12 (1 November 2014), lot 1241. © Roma Numismatics Ltd.



**Fig. 2:** Denarius of Commodus celebrating Fortuna in traditional manner, AD 180 (19 mm, 2.88g)(1.5x); *MIR* 18, 491. Reverse legend: TR·P·V IMP·III COS·II P·P.  
Ex Roma Numismatics, E-Sale 10 (26 July 2014), lot 686. © Roma Numismatics Ltd.

Commodus' imperial predecessors had often celebrated Fortuna on their coinage, and his successors would continue to do so also until the start of the Christianization of the state under Constantine I (AD 306-37) resulted in the dismissal of most of the traditional divinities or personifications from the coinage.<sup>3</sup> However, no other emperor had ever celebrated Fortuna under the same epithet Manens, or would do so subsequently.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, no other emperor had ever depicted her in the same way as Commodus did upon his coinage celebrating her as Manens, or would do so subsequently. He depicted her upon these coins sitting on a low seat holding the bridle of a horse standing beside her in her right hand and a cornucopia in her left hand. Traditionally, the key attributes distinguishing Fortuna from other female personifications had been the rudder and the cornucopia, and she had normally been depicted holding the rudder in her right hand, whether standing or seated (**Fig. 2**). In this case, therefore, the horse has replaced her accustomed rudder, which is depicted resting behind her seat on most dies, although completely omitted on others. This juxtaposition of a seated figure with a standing horse is most unnatural. In reality, it would have been rather difficult and uncomfortable for a seated person to restrain a horse in this manner, although the artist has rendered Fortuna's task a

<sup>3</sup> On the cult of Fortuna during the Roman republican period, see D. Miano, *Fortuna: Deity and Concept in Archaic and Republican Italy* (Oxford, 2018). On her cult during the imperial period, see D.A. Arya, *The Goddess Fortuna in Imperial Rome: Cult, Art, Text*, PhD thesis submitted at the University of Texas at Austin in 2002. For a full list of the numerous epithets associated with Fortuna in various media, see I. Kajanto, 'Fortuna', *ANRW* II.17.1, pp. 502-58, at 510-16. On her depiction, see B. Lichochka, *L'iconographie de Fortuna dans l'empire romain (1<sup>er</sup> siècle avant n.è – IV<sup>e</sup> siècle de n.è)* (Warsaw, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Horace declares of Fortune that he 'praises her while she stays' (*Odes* 3.29.53: *laudo manentem*), but there does not appear to be any other evidence for the use of Manens as her epithet.

little easier here by reducing the size of the horse to that of a large dog relatively speaking. Nevertheless, it seems that he has simply inserted a horse into the standard contemporary depiction of Fortuna with minimal effort to render a realistic, lifelike scene. So why do this? What was the significance of this horse?

The fact that the mint at Rome had never depicted Fortuna in association with a horse in this way previously, and would not do so again, means that there are no precedents or parallels to assist in the interpretation of this type.<sup>5</sup> Hence one is forced to a consideration of the numismatic significance of the horse more generally. The primary function of the horse in the ancient world was as a means of transport, and it was used as such in various different situations, whether simply to journey from one point to another, to hunt boar, deer, or other forms of fast game, to race, or to fight as a cavalryman. Accordingly, the emperor was often depicted using a horse in various different ways upon the coinage. For example, the mint at Rome had often struck coins celebrating either the *profectio* ('departure') of the emperor, that is, his setting out on some journey away from the capital, or his *adventus* ('arrival'), his return to the capital after a journey abroad.<sup>6</sup> Typically, these types depicted the emperor sitting on horseback, often with one or more soldiers as escort. Much more rarely, the emperor had sometimes been depicted hunting on horseback.<sup>7</sup> However, the horse was never itself the main subject, and was almost always an attribute of the emperor as he conducted some activity or other. Hence the ubiquity of the horse, the fact that it was commonly used in a variety of very different activities makes it difficult to understand its significance in any particular context unless it is also accompanied by other attributes that help clarify this context: a horse by itself is a very ambiguous symbol.

The obvious assumption in the case of the coins under discussion is that their sudden inclusion of a horse among the attributes of Fortuna was somehow connected to their unique description of her as Manens also, but the nature of this connection or association is not at all clear. The term *manens* is a present participle formed from the verb *manere* 'to remain in the same place, not to go away, stop'.<sup>8</sup> It is clear, therefore, that these coins celebrate the fact that Fortuna has not gone away. Furthermore, given the very nature of Roman imperial coinage, and the fact that previous celebrations of her on the coinage had often explicitly described her as

<sup>5</sup> The town of Antiochia ad Hippum in Roman Palestine depicted its Tyche or Fortuna together with a horse as the main device on the reverse of many of the coins struck there between the reigns of Nero (AD 54-68) and Elagabalus (AD 218-22). See A. Spijkerman, *The Coins of the Decapolis and Provincia Arabia*, *Studii Biblici Franciscani Collectio Maior* 25 (Jerusalem, 1978), pp. 168-79. However, despite some superficial similarities between its coins and the type under discussion, the former cannot assist in understanding the latter, not least because the inclusion of a horse (Greek *hippos*) among the attributes of the patron divinity of Antiochia ad Hippum was simply intended in play upon the name of that town and does not reveal anything of more universal applicability.

<sup>6</sup> No *profectio* type was struck under Commodus. His only *adventus* type (sestertius: *MIR* 18, 471) was struck in association with a type depicting Fortuna Redux (sestertius: *MIR* 18, 472), where both celebrated his return to Rome from the Danube frontier in AD 180.

<sup>7</sup> Commodus was sometimes depicted hunting a lion on horseback. See *MIR* 18, 537 (AD 182), 666-67 (AD 185), 1089 (AD 182/83), 1147 (AD 190/91).

<sup>8</sup> P.G.W. Glare, *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford, 2012), pp. 1179-80.

*August(-i)* or *(-a)*, that is, as belonging to the emperor, it is natural to assume that these coins celebrate the fact that Fortuna had not left the emperor, that is, that he had recently enjoyed, or was enjoying still, some great good fortune. But why the horse? The very fact that Fortuna is depicted seated suffices in itself to convey the idea of her permanent, continuing presence with the emperor, and it is difficult to understand what the presence of this horse adds to this basic understanding of the epithet *Manens*. Consequently, since the horse is not necessary to convey the idea of a continued presence in some generic sense, the suspicion must be that it serves as a visual reminder of the specific incident that had sparked this particular celebration of her continued attendance upon the emperor.

As one struggles to understand how an incident involving a horse might have sparked such a celebration, one immediately recalls the role of the horse in the simple transport of the emperor from one place to the next. Hence one commentator has tentatively identified Fortuna *Manens* as 'perhaps the patroness of cancelled journeys'.<sup>9</sup> Yet, apart from the fact that it is not clear how the cancellation of an intended journey could reasonably be represented as an example of good fortune, the celebrations of such a cancellation should probably have focussed on the continued presence of the emperor himself rather than of his Fortuna. Furthermore, even if such a type had been intended to celebrate the alleged role of Fortuna in detaining the emperor rather than of the emperor himself in staying, it ought then to have described her as *Detinens* instead rather than as *Manens*.

Another possibility, since Commodus was notorious for his devotion to charioteering is that this type may have been intended as a celebration of some victory that either he himself or, more probably, one of his favourites had enjoyed on the racetrack.<sup>10</sup> Against this interpretation, however, one notes that the reverse type does not include any symbols of victory, no laurel wreath, palm branch or anything like that in association with the horse by which to indicate that it had enjoyed some sort of victory.

A third possibility is that the Fortuna depicted here is identical with the Fortuna *Equestris* in whose honour the praetor Fulvius Flaccus had vowed a temple in Rome following his defeat of the Celtiberians in Spain in 180 BC.<sup>11</sup> However, whatever the precise origin of the cult, it is clear that by the early 1<sup>st</sup> century AD at latest Fortuna *Equestris* had become the patron of the Equestrian order rather than of cavalry warfare proper, and there is no obvious reason why Commodus should suddenly have wanted to associate himself so strongly with the patron goddess of this order.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, if he had wanted to celebrate Fortuna *Equestris* as the patron goddess of cavalry warfare instead, one might perhaps have expected some clearer indications that this was the case, the addition of some weapons or armour perhaps to the scene.

<sup>9</sup> J.P. Kent, *Roman Coins* (New York, 1978), p. 302.

<sup>10</sup> On Commodus's love of charioteering, see Dio 72.17.1; *Hist. Aug. Commodus* 2.9. On his reign in general, see O. Hekster, *Commodus: An Emperor at the Crossroads* (Leiden, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. J. Eckhel, *Doctrina Numorum Veterum: De Moneta Romanorum* VII (Vienna, 1828), p. 115. On the foundation of this temple, see Livy 40.39-40.

<sup>12</sup> See Tacitus, *Annales* 3.71.

Finally, it has even been suggested that the depiction of Fortuna with a horse may have been intended to celebrate the award of an ovation, or lesser triumph, to Commodus, although for no more reason than that the emperor rode on horseback rather than in a chariot during an ovation.<sup>13</sup> Again, however, the absence of any symbols of victory from the scene tells against this interpretation. Furthermore, if the type had really been intended to allude to the celebration of an ovation, then it surely would have been much clearer simply to depict Commodus himself actually riding upon a horse.

Rather than speculating further about the possible significance of the horse, a never-ending exercise considering the ubiquity of the horse in the Roman world, it may prove more productive at this point to focus on the epithet *Manens* instead and to consider what it meant in the wider cultural context to claim that a divinity had either remained with, or left, an emperor before returning to focus on the significance of the horse once more. The key point here is that any evidence that his patron or guardian divinity had departed from an emperor had long been interpreted as an omen that his death was near at hand.<sup>14</sup> For example, Plutarch records that on the night before Octavian made his final assault upon his rival Mark Antony trapped in Alexandria in Egypt in 30 BC, that is, on the night before Mark Antony committed suicide, music and shouting were heard as if a crowd of revellers were departing the city, and that this was interpreted as a sign that the god Bacchus had finally deserted Mark Antony.<sup>15</sup> Of even greater relevance, Suetonius records that Fortuna appeared in a dream to the emperor Galba (AD 68-69) threatening to take back what she herself had granted to him because he had consecrated a precious necklace originally intended for her to the goddess Venus instead, and that when Galba immediately rushed to her temple in Tusculum in order to placate her, the evidence proved that she had deserted both it and him.<sup>16</sup> This idea, that his patron divinity would desert an emperor immediately before his death, continued far beyond the period under discussion into the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. For example, Ammianus Marcellinus records that the emperor Julian (AD 360-63) believed that he saw the *genius publicus* departing from his tent shortly before he was fatally wounded in a skirmish with the Persians.<sup>17</sup> In the context of this cultural tradition, therefore, any celebration of Fortuna placing an unusual emphasis upon her continued presence with an emperor would most probably have been intended to celebrate the fact that she had not left him, that is, that she had recently preserved him from some deadly threat. The explicit, emphatic use of the term *Manens* here suggests that this type is not some vague, generic celebration of the presence of Fortuna with the emperor, as was normally the case, but celebrates rather some important concrete proof of what had merely been assumed to be the case heretofore.

<sup>13</sup> Lichochka, *L'iconographie de Fortuna*, p. 280.

<sup>14</sup> See O. Hekster, 'Reversed epiphanies: Roman emperors deserted by Gods', *Mnemosyne* 63 (2010), pp. 601-15.

<sup>15</sup> Plutarch, *Antony* 75.3-4.

<sup>16</sup> Suetonius, *Galba* 18.2.

<sup>17</sup> Amm. Marc. 25.2.3.



One may now return to the significance of the horse. If the unusual emphasis on the continued presence of Fortuna with the emperor points to his recent escape from death, then the inclusion of a horse among the attributes of Fortuna suggests a lucky escape from some potentially fatal accident involving a horse in particular. But how likely was such an event in reality? In fact, such incidents were not uncommon in the Roman world since horses were heavy, powerful beasts perfectly capable of inflicting fatal injuries in the case of accident or if provoked or panicked.<sup>18</sup> For example, Drusus, the step-son of Augustus and brother of the future emperor Tiberius, died thirty days after his horse collapsed on him and broke his leg while he was serving in Germany in 9 BC.<sup>19</sup> Again, the emperor Theodosius II (AD 402-50) fell from a horse, damaged his spine, and died a few days afterwards as a result.<sup>20</sup> Others were luckier and survived accidents that could easily have turned out very differently. For example, while driving a ten-horse chariot at the Olympic games in AD 67, the emperor Nero was thrown from it, and was nearly crushed to death.<sup>21</sup> Again, the emperor Julian had been about to mount his horse Babylonius in AD 363 when it suddenly collapsed and rolled on the ground in pain, although he escaped unharmed.<sup>22</sup> In the light of such evidence, therefore, it would not be at all surprising to learn that Commodus had also experienced a lucky escape from a potentially fatal accident involving a horse.

In this manner, it is arguable that Commodus may have celebrated his Fortuna under the epithet *Manens* and depicted her holding a horse by its bridle in order to mark the fact that he had recently survived a potentially fatal accident involving a horse.<sup>23</sup> He depicted Fortuna mastering a horse on the coinage to mark the fact that she had mastered one in real life earlier in order to preserve him unharmed. Unfortunately, none of the three main surviving sources for his reign – Dio, Herodian, or the *Historia Augusta* – preserve a record of such an accident, but this is hardly surprising since none preserves a very detailed account of his reign. Of course, the gods would eventually desert Commodus, as proven by the fact that shortly before his death their footprints were discovered departing from the Forum Romanum, but by AD 189 his Fortuna still attended upon him, or so he thought.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Accidents were particularly likely in the stress of battle, although these are not of great relevance here because Commodus was not an active commander. So the emperor Decius (AD 249-51) lost control of his horse in battle, fell from it, and drowned in a marsh (Amm. Marc. 31.13.13).

<sup>19</sup> Livy, *Epitome* 142.

<sup>20</sup> John Malalas, *Chron.* 14.27; *Chronicon Paschale* s.a. 450.

<sup>21</sup> Suetonius, *Nero* 24.2; Dio 63.14.1.

<sup>22</sup> Amm. Marc. 23.3.6.

<sup>23</sup> Other numismatic celebrations of escape from death include Nero's striking of coins with reverse legend IVPPITER CVSTOS 'Jupiter the Guardian' in order to mark his survival of the Pisonian conspiracy against him in AD 65. See *RIC* 1<sup>2</sup>, Nero nos 52-53, 63-64, 69. On the Pisonian conspiracy, see Tacitus, *Annals* 15.48-74; Dio 72.24-27. Furthermore, Commodus struck coins hailing Jupiter as his defender in AD 191 in apparent reference to the failure of the alleged plot of his praetorian prefect Cleander against him in the previous year. See *MIR* 18, 822-23. On the conspiracy by Cleander, see Dio 72.13; Herodian 1.12.3-13.6; *Hist. Aug. Commodus* 7.1-3

<sup>24</sup> On the footsteps departing the forum, see *Hist. Aug. Commodus* 16.2.



