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Caligula's Quadrans

by

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Caligula's Quadrans

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CALIGULA used the same basic type of quadrans from his first production of this denomination in 39 until his assassination in January 41. The obverse depicted a *pileus*, a type of cap given to former slaves upon their manumission, between the letters SC, all surrounded by an outer legend reading C CAESAR DIVI AUG PRON AUG ('Gaius Caesar Augustus, great-grandson of the Deified Augustus'). The reverse depicted the letters RCC surrounded by an outer legend describing the emperor's titles and powers. The variations in this outer legend allow us to distinguish four different series of production according to how often he had received tribunician power or the consulship, from his designation as consul for the third time in late 39 until his fourth consulship in 41.¹ Modern commentators have tended to follow the interpretations of the obverse and reverse types advanced by Eckhel in the 18th century. He had suggested that the central letters on the reverse referred to Caligula's remission of the sales-tax, to be read as *remissa ducentesima*, and that the *pileus* of the obverse referred to the restoration of liberty represented by his return of the elections to the popular comitia from the Senate.²



British Museum, *BMCRE* 61. 17mm, 2.31g, 06h (1.5x)

A.A. Barrett, however, advanced strong arguments against both these interpretations.³ He offered two arguments against the interpretation of the reverse. The first was that there is serious uncertainty concerning the rate of the sales-tax by the time that Caligula

¹ On the four series, see *RIC*² I, Caligula nos. 39, 45, 52; *BMC* no. 79.

² J. Eckhel, *Doctrina Numorum Veterum* II (Vienna, 1796), p. 224. Following his interpretation of the reverse, although sometimes rejecting his interpretation of the obverse, see e.g. H. Willrich, 'Caligula', *Klio* 3 (1903), pp. 397-470, at 424-25; J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *The Emperor Gaius* (Oxford, 1934), pp. 152, 186; J.A. Maurer, *A Commentary on C. Suetonii Tranquilli Vita C. Caligulae Caesaris Chapters I-XXI* (Philadelphia, 1949), p. 68; C.H.V. Sutherland, *Coinage in Roman Imperial Policy 31BC-AD68* (London, 1951), pp. 119-20; A.U. Stylow, 'Die Quadranten des Caligula als Propagandamünzen', *Chiron* 1 (1971), pp. 285-90; D.W. Hurley, *An Historical and Historiographical Commentary on Suetonius' Life of C. Caligula*, *APA American Classical Studies* 32 (Atlanta, 1993), p. 58; D. Wardle, *Suetonius' Life of Caligula: a Commentary*, *Collection Latomus* 225 (Brussels, 1994), pp. 172-73.

³ A.A. Barrett, 'Caligula's quadrans issue', *Latomus* 57 (1998), pp. 846-52.

abolished it, since, although Suetonius records that he abolished a *ducentesima* (0.5%), Dio records that he abolished a *centesima* (1%).⁴ Hence the final two letters of the legend RCC do not necessarily refer to a 0.5% sales-tax. The second concerns the discrepancy between the date at which this type of quadrans was first issued in late 39 and the date of the abolition of the sales-tax which Dio specifically dates to 38 and which a general consideration of the political and economic circumstances of his reign also suggests ought to belong to this earlier period. It does not make sense that Caligula should have waited for the best part of a year or more to commemorate his remission of the sales-tax on the quadrans in this way.

Barrett also offered three arguments against Eckhel's interpretation of the obverse. The first was that it was doubtful whether the population would have regarded the restoration of the elections to the popular assemblies as a manifestation of liberty, not least as this was really only a cosmetic exercise. The second was that Dio dates the restoration of the elections to the popular assemblies to 38 once more rather than to late 39.⁵ Finally, while Caligula continued to issue this obverse type until his death, he had already himself reversed his earlier decision and restored the elections to the senate by the time of his death.⁶ Hence Eckhel's interpretation requires that Caligula continued to commemorate an action that he had already revoked, and this seems doubtful even for someone of Caligula's apparently capricious nature. It is not surprising, therefore, that more recent commentators have tended to reject Eckhel's interpretation of the obverse in favour of that of Stylow who, pointing to developments in the third century, argued that the liberty symbolised by the cap was to be equated with liberality, in this case, the liberality of the emperor in abolishing the sales-tax.⁷ However, as Barrett objects, there is no evidence that this merging of concepts had occurred in the first century.⁸

Barrett offered a new interpretation, emphasizing the interpretation of the obverse and assuming that the reverse probably celebrated the same event. His starting point was the date of first issue of this coin type. Clearly, it ought to celebrate something occurring late in 39. He next compared the iconography on the obverse to that on the denarius issued by Marcus Brutus in 43/42 BC to commemorate the assassination of Julius Caesar on the Ides of March 44 BC, on which the reverse depicts a *pileus* between two upright daggers, with the legend EID MAR below.⁹ He also compared it to the reverse of a denarius issued by Galba in 68 during his rebellion against

⁴ Suet. *Cal.* 16.3; Dio 59.9.6. Tiberius had halved the original rate to 0.5% in 17 following his annexation of Cappadocia (Tac. *Ann.* 2.42.4), but had apparently increased it again in 31 (Dio 58.16.2). Adherents to the traditional interpretation of the letters RCC assume, first, that Tiberius must have reduced the tax again after 31, although there is no evidence for this, and, second, that Dio must be wrong when he describes the tax as a *centesima* rather than a *ducentesima* in 38. It is not clear whether one ought to prefer Suetonius or Dio in this matter, although Dio's testimony possesses the advantage of consistency.

⁵ Dio 59.9.6.

⁶ Dio 59.20.4-5.

⁷ See Stylow, 'Quadranten', p. 290, followed by Hurley, *Commentary*, p. 58, n. 27, and Wardle, *Commentary*, p. 173.

⁸ Barrett, 'Caligula's quadrans issue', p. 850, n. 15.

⁹ *RRC* no. 508, 3. See H. Mattingly, 'EID MAR', *L'Antiquité Classique* 17 (1948), pp. 445-51.

Nero, which also depicted a *pileus* between two upright daggers with the legend RESTITUTA below to be read in conjunction with the legend LIBERTAS on the obverse.¹⁰ Hence he argued that the obverse on Caligula's quadrans was intended to commemorate the death of some alleged threat to liberty in the same way that Brutus had commemorated the death of Julius Caesar as the restoration of liberty. He concluded that the quadrans was probably intended to celebrate the execution in late 39 of Cornelius Lentulus Gaetulicus, the governor of Upper Germany, who was alleged to have been plotting against Caligula.¹¹ As for the reverse, he could find no epigraphic or numismatic parallel for the legend RCC, but assumed that it probably also referred to the suppression of Gaetulicus' alleged plot. Hence he speculated that the letters were probably to be expanded to read *Restituti Concordia Consensus, Restitutor Concordiae Consensusque*, or something similar.

The purpose of the present note is to offer a new interpretation of Caligula's quadrans as an alternative to that proposed by Barrett. The main advantage of Barrett's interpretation is that it pays proper attention to chronology. Hence I accept his initial premise that the quadrans celebrates something that occurred in late 39. The main weakness of his interpretation, however, is that it exaggerates the similarity between the obverse of the quadrans and the reverse of the denarius issued by Brutus in 43/42 BC. The main difference is that the obverse of the quadrans does not depict a pair of daggers, or any dagger at all, a striking omission given that Caligula was well accustomed otherwise to the symbolic use of weapons.¹² Barrett was aware that this posed a serious challenge to his interpretation, but his claim that the absence of the daggers 'is not difficult to explain, since the small flan and subsequent lack of space would have made their representation on this issue all but impossible' does not convince.¹³ After all, those responsible for other designs on coins of similar size in roughly the same period sometimes managed to include far more detail. Hence it seems likely that daggers played no part in the event which Caligula celebrated. There was no necessary association between *pileus* and dagger, and the *pileus* was often depicted without the presence of a dagger, real or implied.¹⁴ One should rather focus on the symbolism of the *pileus* itself and not be distracted by the superficial resemblance between the obverse of the quadrans and the reverse of Brutus' denarius.

A second weakness in Barrett's interpretation is that it pays insufficient attention to the fact that the use of these reverse and obverse types was limited to the quadrans.

¹⁰ For Galba's coin, see *RIC*² I, Civil Wars nos. 24-25.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of this alleged plot, see A.A. Barrett, *Caligula: the Corruption of Power* (London, 1989), pp. 99-113.

¹² He sent three daggers to Rome for dedication in the temple of Mars Ultor following his execution of his former favourite Lepidus (Suet. *Cal.* 24.3; Dio 59.22.7), often argued to have been a co-conspirator of Gaetulicus. Similarly, he threatened his exiled sisters that he had swords as well as islands (Suet. *Cal.* 29.1), and warned a senatorial embassy that he was bringing his sword with him as he returned to Rome from Gaul (Suet. *Cal.* 49.1).

¹³ Barrett, 'Caligula's quadrans issue', p. 851.

¹⁴ For example, the personification Liberty is often depicted on coinage holding a *pileus*, but never a dagger. See e.g. *RIC*² I, Clodius Macer nos. 19-21 (*pileus* and patera); Galba nos. 37-39 (*pileus* and sceptre), nos. 68-75 (*pileus* and rod).

If either design-type had really celebrated the execution of an alleged conspirator of such senior stature as Gaetulicus, there seems no good reason why Caligula should have restricted its use to the lowest coin denomination. This is another important difference between his use of the *pileus* as the main design and its use by Brutus and Galba, for they used it on the denarius rather than on some lower denomination. Hence the suspicion must be that, whatever message Caligula intended to convey by the use of the *pileus*, it was aimed at the poorer classes most accustomed to daily handling of the quadrans rather than at the senatorial elite or army. The same objection remains valid for any other interpretation of the *pileus* as representing liberty in some other sense, and not just the liberty restored or protected as a result of the execution of an alleged conspirator. One needs to explain why Caligula proclaimed this liberty on the quadrans alone while Galba, for example, proclaimed the liberty which he claimed to restore on every denomination that he issued, from aureus to as.¹⁵

While it is true that the *pileus* came to symbolise liberty, one needs to remember that it symbolised the liberty only of one particular group, Roman citizens. When slaves were manumitted in the Roman system, they also became Roman citizens.¹⁶ Hence the *pileus* was the symbol of newly acquired Roman citizenship, and of the liberty consequent upon such citizenship, rather than of universal liberty in the modern sense.¹⁷ This suggests that the *pileus* on the quadrans may refer to some aspect of Caligula's policy with regard to Roman citizenship rather than to some alleged defence of liberty. In a section describing the various abuses to which Caligula was eventually forced to resort in order to try and raise some money, Suetonius describes how he conducted some form of crackdown upon those whom he believed were illegally claiming citizenship:

‘He ruled that Roman citizenship could not lawfully be enjoyed by those whose forefathers had obtained it for themselves and their descendants, except in the case of sons, since ‘descendants’ ought not to be understood as going beyond that degree; and when certificates of the deified Julius and Augustus were presented to him, he waved them aside as old and out of date.’¹⁸

¹⁵ On coins proclaiming liberty under Galba (whether *LIBERTAS RESTITUTA*, *LIBERTAS PUBLICA*, or *LIBERTAS AUGUSTA*), see *RIC*² I, Galba nos. 8, 22-23, 37-38, 56 for aurei; Galba nos. 7, 23, 39, 157-59 for denarii; Galba nos. 237, 309-10, 346-49, 387-91, 436-43, 479-80 for sestertii; Galba nos. 136-37, 275-76, 318, 363-67 for dupondii; Galba nos. 68-76, 139, 293-96, 327-28, 372-73, 422-27, 459-61 for asses. In contrast, Caligula did not issue a single type explicitly proclaiming liberty.

¹⁶ On the legal status of freedmen, see S. Treggiari, *Roman Freedmen during the Late Republic* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 37-86.

¹⁷ As M. Hammond, ‘Res Olim Dissociabiles: Principatus ac Libertas’, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 67 (1963), pp. 93-113, at 93, states, ‘by the end of the republic and particularly in Cicero’s writings, liberty had become identified with citizenship in a republic under legal and constitutional government’.

¹⁸ Suet. *Cal.* 38.2: *Negabat iure civitatem Romanam usurpare eos, quorum maiores sibi posterisque eam impetrassent, nisi si filii essent, neque enim intellegi debere “posteror” ultra hunc gradum; prolataque Divorum Iuli et Augusti diplomata ut vetera et obsoleta deflabat.* Text and translation from J.C. Rolfe, *Suetonius* I, Loeb Classical Library 31 (Cambridge, Mass., 1951), pp. 462-65. On the extension of Roman citizenship under Julius Caesar and Augustus in provincial areas in particular, see A.N. Sherwin-White, *The Roman Citizenship* (2nd ed.; Oxford, 1973), pp. 225-36.

Unfortunately, Suetonius does not state exactly when, or where, Caligula began his stricter enforcement of the rules of various grants of citizenship. However, if he is correct, and one of the purposes of this stricter enforcement of the rules was to raise money through the imposition of fines upon those illegally claiming citizenship, or even the confiscation of their goods, then one should probably date it to the beginning of Caligula's financial crisis in late 39.¹⁹ This crisis revealed itself in his decision to auction off a wide range of imperial possessions, in Rome first apparently, but also during his stay in Gaul throughout the winter of 39/40, probably at Lyons.²⁰ It is also arguable that Suetonius' description of how Caligula forced some Gallic provincials to dress up as German prisoners-of-war misrepresents his attempt to punish some Gauls whom he believed to be falsely claiming citizenship by forcing them to return to what he considered to be their native clothes, hairstyles, nomenclature, and so on.²¹ Hence the evidence suggests that one should probably date Caligula's stricter enforcement of the rules of various grants of citizenship to late 39, the period at which he began his production of the quadrans depicting the *pileus*. Furthermore, it is probable that this stricter enforcement of the rules of citizenship played very well with the urban mob at Rome who had traditionally feared competition and reduced benefits as a result of newly created citizens, whether created by the manumission of slaves within Rome itself or by grants of citizenship to whole communities even in the provinces.²² It is arguable, therefore, that Caligula chose to depict the *pileus* on his quadrans in order to celebrate his new policy of strictly enforcing the rules for granting citizenship and that he aimed the design at the urban mob in particular, the ordinary citizens most likely to be affected by imperial policy on granting citizenship, in order to emphasise that he was protecting them against those seeking to encroach upon their privileges.²³ Hence he used this lowest denomination coin to advertise his attention to a concern of the urban poor in the same way that Claudius would when he depicted a *modius* upon the same denomination to celebrate a distribution of corn at his accession.²⁴

It remains to explain the legend RCC on the reverse of this coin. If one may assume with Barrett that the reverse celebrates the same object as the obverse, and this is by no means certain, then it ought to contain some reference to the protection of the rights of Roman citizens. Hence I tentatively suggest *Res Civium Conservatae* ('The interests of citizens have been preserved'), or something similar.

¹⁹ False claims to citizenship remained a problem at Rome into the reign of Claudius, who ruled that those so discovered should be executed in the Esquiline Field (Suet. *Claud.* 25.3).

²⁰ Suet. *Cal.* 39.

²¹ See D. Woods, 'Caligula's Gallic captives (Suet., *Calig.* 47)', *Latomus* 66 (2007), pp. 900-904.

²² See D. Noy, *Foreigners at Rome: Citizens and Strangers* (London, 2000), pp. 34-47.

²³ Caligula's stricter enforcement of the rules of various grants of citizenship probably did not interest the senatorial elite much in so far as, under the empire, no citizens of non-senatorial origin had the right to stand for the offices necessary for admission to the senate. They began to feel threatened only when Claudius sought to grant the privilege of holding such office to some leading Gallic citizens in 48. See e.g. M.T. Griffin, 'The Lyons tablet and Tacitean hindsight', *CQ* 32 (1982), pp. 404-18.

²⁴ See *RIC*² I, Claudius nos. 84, 86, 87, 88, 90, issued during the period 41-42.

