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Aurelian and the Mark VSV: Some Neglected Possibilities

by

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Aurelian and the Mark VSV: Some Neglected Possibilities

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[PLATE 31]

AURELIAN's reform of the coinage in the spring of 274 saw the introduction of several new marks upon it.[1] The weight of the aureus was restored to what it had been under Caracalla, so that it was now struck at the rate of 50 to the lb, and the marks **IL** or **I.L** were added to the exergue of some coins, where **I** is the Roman numeral 1 and **L** the Roman numeral 50, in order to indicate this fact. The weight and silver content of the antoninianus was restored, so that this new coin, the aurelianus as it is now known, contained about 5% silver, and the marks **XXI**, **XX.I** or **KA** were added to the exergue, where **XX** is the Roman numeral 20, **K** the Greek numeral 20, and **A** the Greek numeral 1, in order to indicate this fact, that the coin contained 20 parts of alloy for 1 part of silver. Finally, a laureate denarius was re-introduced which bore the same relationship to the aurelianus as the denarius had borne to the antoninianus when Caracalla had first introduced this in 215, that is, the aurelianus was tariffed at 2 laureate denarii, even though it only weighed 1.6 denarii, and the mark **VSV** was added to the exergue of some of these denarii. This mark is quite different to the marks on the aureus or the aurelianus in that it cannot be resolved to read one or two simple numbers, whether in Latin or Greek. Technically, it could be read as a full word in itself, the ablative case of the noun *usus* 'use', but this does not seem to make sense in the context. Consequently, three different approaches to it have been adopted over the last century.

Current Explanations

The first approach treats **VSV** as some sort of equation to be understood in close association with the marks **XX** and **XX.I**, the most popular explanation being that the mark on the radiate aurelianus was to be read as **X** + **X** = **I** (one) and the mark on the

[1] On this reform, see S. Estiot, *Monnaies de l'Empire romain. XII.1: D'Aurélien à Florien (270-276 après J.-C.)* (Strasbourg, 2004), pp. 41-8, superseding R. Göbl, *Moneta Imperii Romani 47: Die Münzprägung des Kaisers Aurelianus (270/75)* (Vienna, 1995), pp. 79-84. On the role of this reform in undermining public trust in the currency, see now M. Haklai-Rotenberg, 'Aurelian's monetary reform: between debasement and public trust', *Chiron* 41 (2011), pp. 1-39. In general on the reign of Aurelian, see A. Watson, *Aurelian and the Third Century* (London, 1999). High quality digital photographs of the coinage of Aurelian can now be accessed on the website by S. Estiot and J. Mairat, *Roman Imperial Coinage AD268-276* (www.ric.mom.fr).

smaller laureate as **V** + **V** = **S**(*emis*), half of the larger coin.[2] However, as Mattingly pointed out, '**VSV** is not the same as **VVS**, and **VV** needs explanation as a variant form of **X**'.[3] A second approach treats **VSV** as an highly abbreviated form of some slogan or phrase, and this was the approach adopted by Evans when he suggested that **VSV** should be expanded to read **V**(*ota*) **S**(*oluta*) **V** (numeral 5) in reference to Aurelian's discharge of his vows for his first five years of successful reign at his *quinquennalia*.[4] The attraction of this explanation lies in the fact that Aurelian took power in late 269, so that he was indeed celebrating his fifth anniversary about the time that the denarii with this mark were issued. However, it has been objected that the only *vota* celebrated on the coinage during the 2nd and 3rd centuries related to *decennalia* rather than *quinquennalia*, the sole exception occurring under the Gallic usurper Postumus (260-69).[5] Even then, Postumus' issue used the letter **Q** in abbreviated reference to his discharged quinquennial vows, and the mint at Rome used the letters **QQ** in reference to Maxentius' discharged quinquennial vows when it first celebrated them in *c*.310.[6] Hence it is doubtful whether the mint at Rome would have used the numeral **V** in abbreviated reference to Aurelian's discharged quinquennial vows in 274, even if it had wanted to celebrate them. Furthermore, the abbreviated references to vows on the coinage never included a single letter **S** as part of their formulae, the reason being that the accompanying numeral, or its equivalent, always made it clear whether the vows being celebrated were those being discharged (*soluta*) or those being undertaken for the future (*suscepta*), and the addition of the letter **S** would not have added to the clarity of the formulae in any way.[7] Finally, a third approach treats **VSV** as the abbreviation of a single word.

[2] See e.g. E.A. Sydenham, 'The Roman monetary system, Part II', *NC* 19 (ser. 4) (1919), pp. 114-71, at 146; M. Allotte de la Fuÿe, 'La marque monétaire VSV sur les pièces d'Aurélien et de Séverine', *RN* 1923, pp. 154-62; J. Lafaurie, 'Réformes monétaires d'Aurélien et de Dioclétien', *RN* 17 (1975), pp. 73-138, at 96-98.

[3] H. Mattingly, 'Sestertius and denarius under Aurelian', *NC* 5 (ser. 5) (1927), pp. 219-32, at 227, n. 25.

[4] His explanation was not properly published, but was merely noted in the *Proceedings of the Royal Numismatic Society, Session 1918-19*, p. 13, in the minutes for the meeting of 24 April 1919. In support, see e.g. P.H. Webb, 'The reform of Aurelian', *NC* 19 (ser. 4) (1919), pp. 235-43, at 243, and again in *RIC* 5,1, p. 14.

[5] J.-P. Callu, *La politique monétaire des empereurs romains de 238 à 311* (Paris, 1969), p. 328 (forgetting Postumus); V. Cubelli, *Aureliano imperatore: la rivolta dei monetieri e la cosiddetta riforma monetaria* (Florence, 1992), p. 77.

[6] See *RIC* 5, Postumus no. 51; *RIC* 6, Rome nos 237-38, 281a-c. However, Constantine I's quinquennial coinage *c*.310 used the numeral **V**. See *RIC* 6, Trier no. 821, Antioch no. 129. The numeral **V** became standard subsequently. See R.W. Burgess, 'Quinquennial vota and the imperial consulship in the fourth and fifth centuries, 337-511', *NC* 148 (1988), pp. 77-96.

[7] Hence Postumus' coinage depicted Victory inscribing either **V Q** upon a shield (*RIC* 5, Postumus no. 51), in reference to his discharged vows, or **VOT X** (*RIC* 5, Postumus nos 34-5), in reference to his vows taken for the next five years until his tenth anniversary, but not **VSQ** or **VOTSX.** Earlier reverse legends had sometimes referred to **VOT.** or **VOTA SOL.** (e.g. *RIC* 3, Antoninus Pius nos 291-92, 792, 813, 1008-09, 1018-19, 1026-27, 1062, 1066; Marcus Aurelius nos 247, 1014-15; Commodus nos 140, 161, 522), **VOT.** or **VOTA SOLV.** (e.g. *RIC* 3, Commodus nos 262, 602-03), **VOTA SOLVT**. (e.g. *RIC* 4, Septimius Severus nos 307; Caracalla nos. 204-05), and **VOTA SOLVTA** (e.g. *RIC* 3, Marcus Aurelius no. 1016), but never **VOT.** or **VOTA S.**.

Hence Mattingly suggested that that it should probably be expanded to read the Latin adjective **VSV**(*alis*) 'ordinary' used as the official title of this new coin.[8] This suggestion seems to be generally accepted now, although sometimes with a certain reluctance, and it is usually suggested also that this unit is probably identifiable with the accounting unit described by the emperor Diocletian's Price Edict of 301, for example, as the *denarius communis*.[9] However, there are several problems with this interpretation.

The first problem with the expansion of **VSV** to read **VSV**(*alis*) is that there is no evidence that the term *usualis* was ever officially used of any denomination coin at any period. The main argument in support of expanding **VSV** to read **VSV**(*alis*) is that a series of coin-weights of uncertain 4th or 5th-century date use this term in reference to solidi. An example at Carthage bears the legend **VSVALE**[ ]/ **INTEGR**[ ]/ **SOLIDI**/ **III**, another in Paris bears the legend **VSV**/ **SOL**/ **XXIIII**, and an example in the BM bears the legend **VSLDN**/ **SOL**/ **XII** (**Pl. 31, 1**).[10] However, there is no evidence that these were official coin-weights, and it ought to be clear from the context that the term *usualis* was intended merely in description of the status or condition of coins to be weighed ('in use' i.e. 'circulated') and not as part of their official title.[11] As far as Aurelian's coinage is concerned, therefore, the coin-weights are of limited relevance. Next, since *usualis* is an adjective, one would normally expect to find it qualifying some noun, in the same way that the *denarius communis* was known as such and not as the *communis*. Furthermore, if this term had then needed to be abbreviated, the natural abbreviation would have been **d.v.** in the same way that the title of the *denarius communis* was abbreviated to **d.c.** in epigraphic and papyrological sources. This raises the question why one should hypothesize the existence of the term *denarius usualis* in the first place, when the term *denarius*

[8] Mattingly, 'Sestertius and denarius', p. 227.

[9] In support, see e.g. A.H.M. Jones, 'Inflation under the Roman Empire', *EHR* 5 (1953), pp. 293-318, at 297; Callu, *La politique monétaire*, p. 329; Cubelli, *Aureliano imperatore*, p. 78; Haklai-Rotenberg, 'Aurelian's monetary reform', pp. 16-17. M. Crawford, 'Finance, coinage and money from the Severans to Constantine', *ANRW* II 2 (1975), pp. 560-93, at 576, n. 69, seems prepared to accept either the reading **VSV**(*alis*) or the formula **V** + **V** = **S**(*emi*s). Estiot, *Monnaies*, p. 65, seems to accept that the mark could have multiple valid meanings, that it could refer to the quinquennial *vota* as well as meaning **VSV**(*alis*). R. Bland, 'Marks of value (certain and possible) on late Roman coins with intrinsic values (from Aurelian)', in W.E. Metcalf (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Coinage* (New York, 2012), pp. 655-62, at 659, dismisses the reference to the *vota*, but seems dubious also concerning the reading **VSV**(*alis*).

[10] For a discussion of all three examples, see E. Babelon, 'Notes sur quelques *exagia solidi* de l'époque constantinienne', *Bulletin archéologique du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques* 8 (1918), pp. 238-44. One letter is missing at the end of the first two lines in the specimen at Carthage. The BM specimen has been published again recently in D. Buckton (ed.), *Byzantium: Treasures of Byzantine Art and Culture from British Collections* (London, 1994), p. 48, no. 30.

[11] Babelon, 'Notes sur quelques *exagia solidi*', pp. 241-42, suggests that **VSLDN** of the BM specimen should be expanded to read **VSVALES DOMINI NOSTRI**, 'ordinary (coins) of Our Lord', while K. Pink, *Römische und byzantinische Gewichte in österreichischen Sammlungen* (Vienna, 1938), cols 41-2, prefers **VSVALES DENARII**, 'ordinary money'. I suggest that it should be expanded to read **VSVALES DENSI**, 'circulated (and) thick', in parallel with the first two lines on the example in Carthage, **VSVALE**[ ]/ **INTEGR**[ ]/ 'circulated and whole', to mean coins that are somewhat worn, but undamaged otherwise.

communis seems to have replaced it very shortly afterwards. Ockham's razor suggests that the term *denarius communis* had probably performed the necessary function from the start. The next problem is that throughout the various monetary reforms of the late third and early fourth centuries attempts to define the value of a coin were normally expressed numerically rather than verbally, whether this referred to the number of coins per 1b of metal, the proportion of metals within a coin, or the value of the coin in terms of some other common denomination.[12] The name of the coin itself seems never to have been spelled out in the manner required here. Finally, and most importantly, the limited use of the mark **VSV** contrasts to the extended use of the mark **XXI** to suggest that they served very different purposes. The mark **VSV** was only used by one mint, Rome, for one short period, during its 10th emission in late 274.[13] The same mint continued to issue the same denomination with the same main reverse types for two more emissions during the reigns of Aurelian or of his wife Severina, but did not repeat the use of the mark **VSV**.[14] In contrast, Rome never ceased to use the mark **XXI** on its aureliani once it had begun to do so, from its first issue of the aureliani during its 8th emission until the 12th emission under Severina alone. The contrast becomes even starker once one realises that the mark **XXI** remained in continued use throughout the mint system until Diocletian reformed the coinage once more in 294. While laureate denarii were usually only struck at Rome, it never repeated the use of the mark **VSV** during this period either, despite the fact that it continued to strike aureliani with the mark **XXI**, or some variant thereof, throughout the same period.[15] This all suggests that the mark **VSV** was not in fact a mark of value comparable to **XXI**, but an abbreviation of some sort of political slogan that was only relevant in the limited context of Rome in late 274. Since Aurelian returned to Rome at this period in order to celebrate a triumph for his varied victories, not least his defeats of Zenobia in the East and of Tetricus, the last ruler of the secessionist 'Gallic' empire, in the West, there must be a suspicion that the slogan probably relates to the celebrations then.[16]

It is important at this point to clarify how this mark was used during its limited occurrence at Rome in late 274. It occurred on only four reverse types, one struck in the 2nd workshop in the name of Aurelian, and three in the 3rd workshop in the name of his wife Severina. That struck in the name of Aurelian depicts Victory walking to the left, extending a wreath before her with her right hand and with a long palm branch in her left hand (**Pl. 31, 2**), sometimes with a captive seated before her.[17] The accompanying legend always reads **VICTORIA AVG** 'The Victory of Augustus'.

[12] Some letters have been identified as abbreviated names of coins in several instances, but alternative explanations are also possible. See e.g. Bland, 'Marks of value', p. 657, on the letters **IS/ INT** on some *solidi* from Antioch c.317-19 (*RIC* 7, Antioch nos 22-23).

[13] Estiot, *Monnaies*, p. 300.

[14] Estiot, *Monnaies*, pp. 304-05, 308.

[15] For denarii, see e.g. *RIC* 5, Tacitus nos 98-100 (Rome); Florian no. 49 (Rome); Probus nos 244-59 (Rome); Carus (& family) nos 51-53, 144, 163-64, 273-75, 331-32, 427 (Rome); Diocletian (& colleagues) nos 112-13 (Lyons), 186-88 (Rome), 517-18, 663-64, 708 (Rome).

[16] Eutropius, *Breviarium* 9.13; *HA Aurel*. 33-4.

[17] See Göbl, *MIR* 47, no. 135 = *RIC* 5, Aurelian no. 71 (without captive); Göbl, *MIR* 47, no. 135A = *RIC* 5, Aurelian nos 72-3 (with captive).

One type issued in the name of Severina depicts Laetitia standing, extending a wreath before her with her right hand, and with her left hand on an anchor, all surrounded by the legend **LAETITIA AVG** 'The Joy of the Augusta' (**Pl. 31, 3**).[18] A second type depicts Venus standing, with a helmet in her outstretched right hand, a long sceptre in her left, and a shield at her feet, all surrounded by the legend **VENVS VICTRIX** 'Venus the Victorious' (**Pl. 31, 4**).[19] Finally, the third type in her name depicts Venus in the same basic pose, although without the shield, surrounded by the legend **VENVS FELIX** 'Venus the Happy' (**Pl. 31, 5**).[20] However, in this case, there is some uncertainty as to the nature or identity of the object which she holds on her extended right hand. Many specimens of this type are rather crude and seem to depict some sort of globular object set upon a triangular object. While standing in this position, Venus had traditionally been shown holding an apple, a helmet, or a Victoriola, although she was normally identified as **VICTRIX** when holding either the helmet or the Victoriola, and as **GENETRIX** while holding the apple.[21] In this case, Estiot tentatively identifies the strange object as an apple, while Webb identifies it as a seated figure, perhaps Cupid.[22] However, this figure cannot represent Cupid because it has no wings. Indeed, it never seems to be depicted with anything even vaguely resembling an appendage, whether wings, arms, or legs. Fortunately, an unusually well-struck and well-preserved specimen of this type (**Pl. 31, 6**) reveals that this apparent object actually consists of a plain globe from whose lower half two lines descend over what seems to be a circular container of some sort (**Pl. 31, 7**).

It is difficult to know what to make of this unique object, or combination of objects, but the answer may well lie in the one of the portents which the Palmyrenes received indicating that the gods had turned against them in their war against the Romans and now favoured the latter under Aurelian. The early 6th-century historian Zosimus preserves our sole account of the key portent:

> 'Something else happened to the Palmyrenes. At Aphaca, between Heliopolis and Byblos, there is a temple to Aphrodite Aphacitis, near which is a pond like an artificial tank. By the temple and in its environs, a fire like a lamp or a sphere burns in the air when people assemble here at certain times, as used to happen quite recently. The people gathered there used to throw into the pond in honour of the goddess gifts of gold and silver or clothing of linen, silk and other precious material, and if they were accepted the light and heavy things both sank, but if rejected both the cloth and anything of gold,

[18] See Göbl, *MIR* 47, no. 136 = *RIC* 5, Severina no. 5.

[19] Not listed in *RIC* 5, Göbl, *MIR* 47, or in Estiot, *Monnaies*. Only one specimen seems to be known, suggesting that this type was either struck in error or that it was almost immediately replaced by the common **VENVS FELIX** type.

[20] See Göbl, *MIR* 47, no. 137 = *RIC* 5, Severina no. 6.

[21] For Venus Victrix standing with a helmet in her hand on the coins of Salonina, wife of Gallienus (253-68), see R. Göbl, *Moneta Imperii Romani 36, 43, 44: Die Münzprägung des Kaiser Valerianus/ Gallienus/ Saloninus (253/68), Regalianus (260) und Macrianus/Quietus (260/62)* (Vienna, 2000), nos 1313, 1368, 1537, 1573, 1582, 1653, 1652, 1654. For Venus Genetrix standing with apple, see Göbl, *MIR* 36, nos 855-58.

[22] Estiot, *Monnaies,* p 163: 'tenant un objet peu identifiable (pomme?)'; *RIC* 5, Severina no. 6: 'holding a seated figure (Cupid?)'. For Venus Felix standing with a cupid in her hand on a coin of Salonina, see Göbl, *MIR 36*, no. 1180.

> silver or other material which naturally sinks could be seen floating on the water. The Palmyrenes in the year before their overthrow came to the festival and in honour of the goddess threw gifts of gold, silver and cloth into the pond. They all sank to the bottom, but in the following year at the same festival, they were all seen floating. Thus the goddess revealed the future, and such was the gods' kindness to the Romans as long as they carefully maintained the sacred rites.'[23]

Given that Aphrodite is the Greek name for the Roman goddess Venus, the similarity between the depiction of a globe shining down over a container on the **VENVS FELIX** reverse type and this description of a burning sphere accustomed to appear at or near a pond at the temple at Aphrodite at Aphaca, suggests that the coins of this type depict Venus holding the symbols of her cult at Aphaca, the burning sphere and artificial tank, in commemoration of her support for Aurelian in his war against the Palmyrenes as demonstrated by the incident just described. In other words, it is arguable that this unique type commemorates a specific historical event. However, whether one accepts this interpretation of the **VENVS FELIX** reverse type or not, it remains clear that the only four reverse types with the mark **VSV** have a common theme, best described, perhaps, as 'joyful victory'. This reinforces the suspicion that this mark conceals some slogan relating to the triumphal celebrations in late 274.

The purpose of this paper is to widen the debate concerning the significance of the mark **VSV** by exploring some new readings of it as potential alternatives to the current reading **VSV**(*alis*). It is a curious feature of the history of the debate on this issue that such little attention has been paid to the second approach as noted above, the treatment of **VSV** as a highly abbreviated form of some slogan or phrase. No-one seems to have investigated the different potential expansions of these letters since Evans, and even he does not seem to have said much. Here one notes that the difficulty in interpreting the mark **VSV** reminds one of the problems once faced by those trying to understand similar marks in the exergue of some issues by the usurper Carausius (286-93) in his break-away empire in Britain and north-western Gaul.[24] He placed the mark **RSR** in the exergue of a large group of coins, both aurei and denarii (**Pl. 31, 8**), as well as in the exergue of a unique bronze medallion, and the mark **I.N.P.C.D.A** in the exergue of another unique bronze medallion (**Pl. 31, 9**), that is to say, in the place where he normally placed the mint-mark on the rest of his coinage otherwise, to the mystification of several generations of numismatists.[25] In a brilliant discovery, de la Bédoyere pointed out that these marks actually derive from the first letters of the words in two successive lines from one of Virgil's *Eclogues*:[26]

[23] Zosimus, *HN* 1.58. Translation from R.T. Ridley, *Zosimus: New History* (Canberra, 1982), pp. 18-19. Constantine I destroyed this temple sometime after he gained possession of the East in 324. See Eusebius, *LC* 8.5-7; *VC* 3.55.

[24] On Carausius, see A.R. Birley, *The Roman Government of Britain* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 371-87. The comparison was made by Webb, 'The reform of Aurelian', p. 242.

[25] On the coins with **RSR** in the exergue, see *RIC* 5, Carausius nos 533-620. On the medallions, see R.A.G. Carson, 'Bronze medallions of Carausius', *British Museum Quarterly* 37 (1973), pp. 1-4.

[26] G. de la Bédoyere, 'Carausius and the marks RSR and I.N.C.P.D.A.', *NC* 158 (1998), pp. 79-88. As Birley, *The Roman Government*, p. 376, states: 'This solution is without a shadow of doubt correct'.

*iam redit et Virgo, **r**edeunt **S**aturnia **r**egna,*
***i**am **n**ova **p**rogenies **c**aelo **d**emittitur **a**lto.*

'Now the Virgin returns, the reign of Saturn returns;
now a new generation descends from heaven on high.'[27]

Hence Carausius used phrases from Virgil's poetry as part of a political campaign intended to promote his reign as the start of a new paradise on earth, the return of the 'Saturnian kingdoms'.

While it had long been suspected that Carausius' reverse type with the legend **EXPECTATE VENI** 'Come, awaited one' probably alluded to a line from the *Aeneid* (2.283), the discovery that these apparent mintmarks were abbreviations of two Virgilian phrases was surprising, to say the least.[28] However, this discovery provides a clear parallel in support of the approach to be adopted here. There is no good reason why Aurelian could not have placed an abbreviated political slogan in the exergue on some of his coins when Carausius certainly did so only about a dozen years later. It would be too much to hope for, of course, that he should have adopted a phrase from same author, but a quick check is necessary. Searching through Virgil's works to discover some sequence of three words beginning with **V**, **S**, and **V**, one quickly discovers that there are relatively few such sequences, and that these can easily be dismissed because they are either incapable of standing alone in the manner of the sequences denoted by the marks **RSR** or **I.N.P.C.D.A**, or simply would not make sense in the context.[29] However, as will become clearer shortly, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Aurelian may have borrowed, or adapted, a phrase from another famous figure instead.

Alternative Expansions

Given the common theme of the types on which the mark **VSV** appears as 'joyful victory', and their date of issue about the time of Aurelian's celebration of his triumph in Rome in late 274, it is not unreasonable to assume that one of the letter **V**'s probably abbreviates some form of the verb *vincere* 'to conquer', or some cognate thereof. Otherwise, if one examines the legends of Aurelian's coinage in the hope that they might shed some light on the political vocabulary of the era, one notes that the **VIRTVS** 'valour' of the emperor was one of his most acclaimed qualities.[30] Hence it is tempting to read these letters in reference to the emperor himself as some acknowledgment of his conquests or valour. For example, they may

[27] Virgil, *Eclogue* 4.6-7. Text and translation from C.P. Goold, *Virgil: Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I-VI* , Loeb Classical Library 63 (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), pp. 48-49.

[28] See e.g. N. Shiel, 'A "quotation" from the *Aeneid* on the coinage of Carausius', *Proc. Vergil Society* 12 (1972-73), pp. 51-3. For this type, see *RIC* 5, Carausius nos 216-18, 554-58, 605, 771-76.

[29] I count 15 such sequences in the *Aeneid* (1.568, 1.710, 2.265, 2.354, 5.649, 5.672, 6.371-2, 6.540, 7.354, 7.377, 7.440, 10.765 (2), 11.153, 11.778), 2 in the *Eclogues* (9.3, 9.37-8), and 1 in the *Georgics* (3.195). While one of these sequences does form the first three words of a famous Virgilian *sententia* or *gnomē* (*Aen*. 2.354: *una salus victis nullam sperare salutem* 'the one salvation for the defeated is not to hope for any salvation'), it is difficult to understand why Aurelian would have adopted such a counsel of despair as his main political slogan during his triumph.

[30] See Göbl, *MIR* 47 nos 80, 85, 114, 127-28, 165-66, 185, 238, 246, 252, 314, 358.

have been intended to be expanded as **V**(*irtute*) **S**(*ua*) **V**(*icit*) 'By his courage he has conquered', or **V**(*irtute*) **S**(*emper*) **V**(*incit*) 'By (his) courage he always conquers', or some variation thereof. Alternatively, one of letter **V**'s may abbreviate either *ubique* or *undique*, both meaning 'everywhere', to give us **V**(*ndique*) **S**(*emper*) **V**(*incit*) 'He always conquers everywhere', or, more probably, **V**(*ndique*) **S**(*emper*) **V**(*ictor*) 'Always and everywhere victor'.[31] However, there is a another possibility also, that Aurelian may have intended some such slogan as these in reference to the god Sol rather than to himself, that is, that the letter **S** may have been intended in abbreviation of some form of the name *Sol*. Two arguments support this interpretation.

The first is that Aurelian exhibited a strong public devotion to the cult of Sol on his coinage, to the extent that the image of Sol became dominant upon it in late 273 and remained so throughout 274. However, what is important here is not so much this dominance, as the way in which Sol was depicted. In 197, Septimius Severus (193-211) had introduced on the imperial coinage the depiction of Sol that remained standard until the early 4th century, Sol standing with his right hand raised and a whip in his left hand (**Pl. 31, 10**), although a globe sometimes replaced the whip, and he was occasionally depicted with both.[32] From the reign of Elagabalus (218-22), Sol was also shown with one foot forward as if advancing rather than merely standing (**Pl. 31, 11**).[33] In the case of Aurelian, however, while Sol was initially depicted in an entirely traditional manner,[34] he was soon depicted standing with a seated captive before him (**Pl. 31, 12**),[35] then standing with a seated captive on either side of him (**Pl. 31, 13**),[36] or with one captive before him as he advanced so that he seemed to be kicking the captive in the back (**Pl. 31, 14**),[37] and, finally, with one captive on either side of him as he advanced, again so that he seemed to be kicking that in front of him in the back (**Pl. 31, 15**).[38] It is clear, therefore, that Aurelian's types began to depict Sol in a much more aggressive pose than previously.[39] Three reverse types of more limited production stand out as particularly violent. The first shows Sol standing with

[31] For the reverse legend **VNDIQVE VICTORES** 'everywhere victors', see *RIC* 5.2, Carus and His Family no. 422 (Rome), Maximianus Herculeus no. 431 (Lyons), Constantius I no. 645 (Lyons). For **VBIQVE VICTORES**, see *RIC* 6, Trier nos 798-800, 808, 817. For the reverse legend **VICTORIOSO SEMPER**, see *RIC* 7, Ticinum no. 59.

[32] On the first depiction of a standing Sol by Severus, 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.

[33] *RIC* 4, Elagabalus nos 28, 40-41, 63, 300-02, 318-20.

[34] For Sol standing alone in the traditional manner, although with various legends, see Göbl, *MIR* 47, nos 56, 113, 134, 210, 218-20, 245, 271, 323, 355, 364, 373, 376. For Sol advancing alone in traditional manner, see Göbl, *MIR* 47, nos 3, 5, 7, 94, 244.

[35] For Sol standing with a seated captive before him, see Göbl, *MIR* 47, nos 67, 117, 221-22, 249, 339, 344, 366, 389-90.

[36] For Sol standing with a seated captive on either side, see Göbl, *MIR* 47, nos 121, 124, 131, 215, 223-24.

[37] For Sol advancing with a seated captive before him, see Göbl, *MIR* 47, nos 116, 340, 345, 374, 378

[38] For Sol advancing with a captive on either side, see Göbl, *MIR* 47, nos 68-75, 118-20, 122-23, 225-28, 230-32, 234, 251, 254, 256-57, 272, 341, 346,

[39] The claim by E. Manders, *Coining Images of Power: Patterns in the Repesentation of Emperors on Imperial Coinage AD193-284* (Leiden, 2012), p. 150, that 'Aurelian's Sol types are not exceptional' is puzzling, but I will pursue this topic in more detail elsewhere.

both feet on a body outstretched upon the ground, while holding a globe in his left hand and what has been described as a sceptre raised high in his right hand (**Pl. 31, 16**).[40] A second reverse type depicts Sol with his left foot forward upon the upper leg of an enemy lying prone before him who raises his arms in surrender or supplication (**Pl. 31, 17**).[41] In his left hand stretched out before him, Sol bears a globe surmounted by a crescent, and in his right hand stretched back behind him he bears a *vexillum*. Finally, a third reverse type depicts Sol in the same basic pose as in the type last described except that in his left hand stretched out before him he bears a bow, while in his right hand stretched back behind him he bears what has usually been described as a laurel-branch (**Pl. 31, 18**).[42] Both the violence and novelty of this imagery suggests that Aurelian wished to emphasize the fact that Sol had borne a special responsibility for his victories against his enemies, the Palmyrenes in particular. It would not be surprising, therefore, to discover that he had invented some slogan to hammer home the same message again, to be used not least at his triumph.

The second argument in support of this interpretation lies in the fact that Aurelian seems to have believed that the god Sol had actually taken to the battlefield itself to assist him during his decisive defeat of Palmyrene forces near Emesa in Syria in late 272. The late 4th-century author of the so-called *Historia Augusta*, our only source for Sol's appearance in this way, describes it as follows:

> 'After this, the whole issue of the war was decided near Emesa in a mighty battle fought against Zenobia and Zaba, her ally. When Aurelian's horsemen, now exhausted, were on the point of breaking their ranks and turning their backs, suddenly by the power of a supernatural agency, as was afterwards made known, a divine form spread encouragement throughout the foot-soldiers and rallied even the horsemen. Zenobia and Zaba were put to flight, and a victory was won in full. And so, having reduced the East to its former state, Aurelian entered Emesa as a conqueror, and at once made his way to the Temple of Elagabalus, to pay his vows as if by a common duty to all. But there he beheld the same divine form which he had seen supporting his cause in the battle. Wherefore he not only established temples there, dedicating gifts of great value, but he also built a temple to the Sun at Rome, which he consecrated with still greater pomp, as we shall relate in the proper place.'[43]

[40] The type occurs with two legends. On this type with the legend **ORIENS AVG**, see Göbl, *MIR* 47, no. 250b1 (Table 112), who attributes it to a 3rd emission from Serdica in 273, and Estiot, *Monnaies*, Pl. 83, no. 204, who attributes it to a 6th emission from Serdica in spring 274. Estiot and Mariat (above, n. 1) also attribute a more recently discovered example of this type to the 8th emission from Cyzicus from spring 273 to spring 274. On this type with the legend **CONSERVAT AVG**, see Webb, *RIC* 5, Aurelian no. 383 (Antioch), who queries whether Sol is holding a sword. Göbl, *MIR* 47, no. 379 (Table 140), attributes this to a 5th emission from Antioch in early 274, while Estiot, *Monnaies*, Pl. 43, nos 1304-06, attributes it to a 5th emission from Antioch from spring 274 to early 275.

[41] *RIC* 5, Aurelian no. 65 (Rome), which Göbl, *MIR* 47, no. 125 (Table 73), attributes to a 5th emission from Rome in the second half of 274, while Estiot, *Monnaies*, Pl. 5, nos 165-70, attributes it to a 9th emission from Rome in summer or autumn 274. The reverse-legend reads **ORIENS AVG**.

[42] *RIC* 5, Aurelian no. 64 (Rome), which Göbl, *MIR* 47, no. 130 (Table 76), attributes to a 6th emission from Rome in the second half of 274, while Estiot, *Monnaies*, Pl. 6, nos 189-216, attributes it to an 11th emission from Rome in 275. The reverse-legend reads **ORIENS AVG**.

[43] *HA Aurel.* 25.3: *Pugnatum est post haec de summa rerum contra Zenobiam et Zabam eius socium apud Emesam mango certamine. Cumque Aureliani equites fatigati iam paene discederent ac terga*

The claim that a god had actually taken to the battlefield itself in support of the Romans is by no means unique. For example, earlier sources claim that the Dioscuri had appeared to assist the Romans against the Latins at the battle of Lake Regillus in 496 BC, while a later source records that two divine youths, presumably the Dioscuri once more, were seen fighting among the forces of Constantine I at the battle of Hadrianopolis in 324.[44]

Hence there is no reason to doubt that Aurelian genuinely believed that a god had played a much more direct role in at least one of his victories than the gods were usually believed to play at this time.[45] As for the precise identity of this god, the oriental god Elagabalus was worshipped as a sun god, and it is likely that his temple contained images of other sun gods also by 272, not least of Sol Invictus.[46] In light of all the other evidence for the devotion of Aurelian to Sol Invictus, therefore, it seems probable that he was the god whom he claimed to have seen fighting on his side near Emesa and whose image he subsequently witnessed in the temple of Elagabalus in the town itself.

If the last two letters of the mark **VSV** are to be expanded to read **S**(*ol*) **V**(*icit*) in reference to Sol's alleged appearance at the battle of Emesa at least, what does one then make of the first letter **V**? It would seem rather odd to claim that Sol had conquered as a result of his *virtus*, since that would seem a given in the case of a god. So perhaps one should prefer to expand the first letter as **V**(*ndique*) in reference to the fact that Sol was believed to have played a similar role in support of Aurelian

darent, subito vi numinis, quod postea est proditum, hortante quadam divina forma per pedites etiam equites restituti sunt. Fugata est Zenobia cum Zaba, et plenissime parta victoria. Recepto igitur orientis statu Emesam victor Aurelianus ingressus est ac statim ad Templum Heliogabali tetendit, quasi communi officio vota soluturus. Verum illum eam formam numinis repperit quam in bello sibi faventem vidit. Quare et illic templa fundavit donariis ingentibus positis et Romae Soli templum posuit maiore honorificentia consecratum, ut suo dicemus loco. Text and translation from D. Magie, *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae III*, Loeb Classical Library 263 (Cambridge, Mass., 1932), pp. 244-45.

[44] On the Dioscuri at Regillus, see e.g. Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* ***2.2***; Valerius Maximus 1.8.1a. On the battle of Hadrianopolis, see Zonaras, *Chron*. 13.1.

[45] F. Paschoud, *Histoire Auguste V.1: Vies d'Aurélien et de Tacite* (Paris, 1996), pp. 143-45, treats the story of the apparition as an invention, the basic reason being that Zosimus does not mention it in his account of the same battle. However, Zosimus, *HN* 1.52-53, supports the basic story as reported by the *HA*, that a major battle took place near Emesa during which the Palmyrene cavalry were besting the Roman cavalry before something turned the battle in the Roman favour once more, the main difference being that Zosimus credits Palestinian forces armed with clubs with turning the battle in the Roman favour where the *HA* credits a 'divine form'. The probable explanation of this difference is that the Latin *HA* preserves the official imperial version, whereas the Greek Zosimus preserves a local eastern tradition. It is not particularly surprising that Aurelian, or other senior Roman officers, should have preferred to credit their victory to divine intervention rather than to the assistance of some lowly clubmen. Watson, *Aurelian*, p. 194, dismisses the story as bogus because 'the coins clearly indicate that Aurelian's special relationship with Sol began in the summer of 273, not a year earlier'. However, coinage does not necessarily reflect religious change as it occurs, as the contradiction between the numismatic and literary evidence for the religion of Constantine I well illustrates. For equally tenuous criticism of Zosimus' account, see R. Suski, 'Aurelian, clubs, and Herodotus: the weapons of troops from Palestine in the battle of Emesa (272AD)', *Eos* 94 (2007), pp. 123-35. I remain unpersuaded also by L. Pedroni, 'The sun without rays and the eclipse of 272', *JLA* 4 (2011), pp. 116-23, who argues that this 'divine form' was actually an eclipse.

[46] 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, at 119-20.

wherever he fought against his enemies, from the Palmyrenes in the East to the separatist Gauls in the West. However, bearing in mind the limited context in which this mark was used, at or about a triumph in Rome, there is an alternative possibility. Here one should recall the famous statement paraded by Julius Caesar at his triumph in Rome in 46 BC in celebration of his victory over Pharnaces of Pontus at Zela the previous year. According to Suetonius:

> 'In his Pontic triumph he displayed among the show-pieces of the procession an inscription of but three words, "I came, I saw, I conquered" (*veni*, *vidi*, *vici*) not indicating the events of the war, as the others did, but the speed with which it was finished.'[47]

It is possible, therefore, that Aurelian deliberately imitated Caesar's famous statement in a similar statement acknowledging Sol's appearance at the battle of Emesa **V**(*eniens*) **S**(*ol*) **V**(*icit*) 'Sol came and conquered', and that he paraded this at his triumph in the same way that Caesar had paraded his at his triumph. On the one hand, this would have been a witty play upon Caesar's words, but it would also have served to make a serious point, that he was not like Caesar who had been famous for his disregard of religion when it suited him.[48] In contrast, Aurelian did not arrogate all the glory to himself, but paid due respect to the god who had won his victory for him. Since it is known that Aurelian did include the traditional placards in his triumphal procession identifying the different groups of prisoners as well as the names of the cities that had sent him golden crowns, it is not a great leap to assume that another placard may have included some reference to the alleged appearance of Sol at Emesa.[49] Indeed, one should probably compare such a placard to that which an officer of Persian origin paraded at the circus in Rome in commemoration of some imperial victory, perhaps during the emperor Constantius II's visit there in 357, a placard depicting a hand extending down from the clouds with an accompanying inscription declaring that this was the hand of God driving off the barbarians.[50] Aurelian surely included some similar acknowledgement of Sol's role in his success at his triumph, a picture accompanied by an inscription.

It is important at this point to emphasize that this interpretation does not require that the issue of the coins with the mark **VSV** must have occurred subsequent to Aurelian's triumph at Rome, or that the relevant mint officials must have witnessed its use at the triumph itself. As in the case of Caesar's expression which some sources say he used in a letter sent to Rome following the battle at Zela, so that it seems

[47] Suetonius, *Julius* 37.2: *Pontico triumpho inter pompae fercula trium verborum praetulit titulum VENI··VIDI··VICI non acta belli significantem sicut ceteris, sed celeriter confecti notam*. Text and translation from J.C. Rolfe, *Suetonius I*, Loeb Classical Library 31 (Cambridge, MA, 1951), pp. 50-51. For a detailed study of the typical features of a Roman triumph, see I. Östenberg, *Staging the World: Spoils, Captives, and Representations in the Roman Triumphal Procession* (Oxford, 2009).

[48] Suetonius, *Julius* 59. On the provocative nature of this statement, see I. Östenberg, '*Veni*, *Vidi*, *Vici*, and Caesar's triumph', *CQ* (forthcoming).

[49] *HA Aurel.* 34.1-3. In general on such placards, see I. Östenberg, '*Titulis oppida capta leget*: the role of the written placards in the Roman triumphal procession', *Mélanges de l'école française de Rome. Antiquité* 121 (2009), pp. 463-72.

[50] See D. Woods, 'A Persian at Rome: Ammianus and Eunapius, *Frg*. 68', in J.W. Drijvers and D. Hunt (eds), *The Late Roman World and its Historian: Interpreting Ammianus Marcellinus* (London, 1999), pp. 156-65.

probable that the placard in his triumph was only repeating a phrase that Caesar had already set into circulation beforehand, so too Aurelian may only have been repeating a phrase that he had already set into circulation beforehand.[51] Furthermore, the fact that none of Aurelian's coins provide any evidence otherwise that he did use the phrase **V**(*eniens*) **S**(*ol*) **V**(*icit*) (or any other expansion of **VSV**) proves little in itself, as none of Caesar's coins provide any evidence of his use of *veni*, *vidi*, *vici* either. The reality is that coinage does not usually provide much insight into political vocabulary at this level.

Finally, one may ask why none of the **VSV** denarii actually show Sol on the reverse, or spell out the legend in full. The fact that none of the coins with the legend **VSV** also depict Sol could suggest that the addition of this legend was partly intended to compensate for this fact, so that he was explicitly celebrated in some way at least on most of the coins issued during this emission. It perhaps clarifies that the crown borne by Victory on the denarii of the **VICTORIA AVG** type was due as much to Sol as to the emperor himself, while that borne by Laetitia on the denarii of the **LAETITIA AVG** type was also due as much to him as to the emperor. As for the burning globe of the temple of Venus at Aphaca as depicted on the **VENVS FELIX** type, it is difficult to believe, given both its nature and its shape, that this was not considered as some form of manifestation of Sol, and that Venus and Sol were in fact regarded as partners in the production of this portent. Again, the addition of the legend **VSV** may have been intended to help clarify this fact. As for the reason why this legend was not spelled out in full, this is probably best explained by the relatively small size of the denarius, but it may not have been considered necessary either in the limited geographical and chronological context of the production of these coins when the celebration of Sol's victory would have been the first topic to spring to mind.

In summary, it is arguable that Aurelian, or one of his officials, may have ordered the mark **VSV,** to be expanded as **V**(*eniens*) **S**(*ol*) **V**(*icit*) 'Sol came and conquered', to be included on the denarii issued at Rome in late 274 in order to ensure that Sol's role in his victories was duly acknowledged on this denomination as well as on the aureliani of the same emission, the bulk of which celebrated Sol as the **ORIENS AVG**(*usti*).[52] This period witnessed not only Aurelian's triumph, but also his inauguration of new games in honour of Sol, probably on 19-22 October, and his consecration of a magnificent new temple to him, probably on 25 December.[53] Hence the focus was very much on Sol at this time and place, and it would not be surprising if someone had decided that the denarii should reflect this fact also, even if only in what may strike us now as a rather weak fashion.

[51] On Caesar's letter, see Plutarch, *Caes*ar 50.2, *Moralia* 206E; Appian, *Bella Civilia* 2.91.

[52] Six workshops produced aureliani in this emission at Rome. The 1st, 2nd, 4th, and 5th produced aureliani in the name of Aurelian, all depicting Sol standing between two captives and surrounded by the legend **ORIENS AVG**, while the 3rd and 6th produced aureliani in the name of his wife Severina, all depicting her shaking hands with her husband and surrounded by the legend **CONCORDIA AVGG**. See Estiot, *Monnaies*, pp. 300-01.

[53] Watson, *Aurelian*, pp. 191-93; G. H. Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus* (Leiden, 1972), pp. 142-44.

Conclusion

I have argued that the mark **VSV** is probably best expanded to read a political slogan current at Rome during the limited period that it was included on the denarius in late 274, about the time of Aurelian's triumphal celebrations. There are several potential expansions of these letters in this manner, all variations of the same theme of victory, declarations that the emperor, or his favourite god Sol, has conquered everywhere. However, one potential expansion seems to stand out in particular, **V**(*eniens*) **S**(*ol*) **V**(*icit*) 'Sol came and conquered' in reference to Sol's alleged appearance at the battle of Emesa in late 272. It is possible that this phrase adapts Julius Caesar's famous saying after the battle of Zela in 47BC, *veni*, *vidi*, *vici* 'I came, I saw, I conquered', and anticipates the use by the rebel emperor Carausius of similarly well-known phrases from Virgil as his political slogans c.286. In this way, each emperor seems to have sought to build upon the familiar in order to make his slogan that much more memorable than it might otherwise have been. Others may suggest further possible expansions of the mark **VSV**, and the discovery of some new inscription or unknown coin type may yet take the debate in an entirely new direction. In reality, therefore, the probability is that we will never know for certain what **VSV** stands for.

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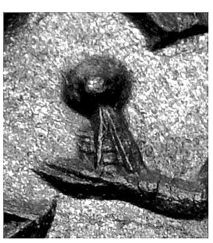
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