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GRATIAN AND THE *PERPETVETAS* SILVER TYPE WITH PHOENIX FROM TRIER: A COMMEMORATION OF HIS DECEASED WIFE CONSTANTIA?

***Abstract** – It is argued that a type of apparent siliqua with reverse depicting the legend PERPETVETAS about a phoenix standing upon a globe was struck at Trier alone either because the revolt by Magnus Maximus (383-388) prevented its production at other western mints also or because it was struck by officials at Trier without due authorization by the imperial court. It is also argued that this type was struck to commemorate the death of Constantia, the wife of the western emperor Gratian (367-383).*

Cuddeford has recently published a catalogue of the surviving examples of a type of apparent *siliqua* (Fig. 1) struck at Trier alone sometime during the period between the accession of the eastern emperor Theodosius I on 19 January 379 and the death of the western emperor Gratian on 25 August 383.[1] Of the twelve known examples, three were struck in the name of Gratian (367-383), four in the name of his brother Valentinian II (375-392), and five in the name of Theodosius I (379-395). There is nothing remarkable about the obverse of this type which depicts the standard draped and cuirassed bust with pearl diadem in the case of each of the three emperors. However, the reverse is more noteworthy. It depicts a nimbate phoenix, facing to the left, standing upon a zoned globe, all surrounded by the legend PERPETVETAS [*sic*] which appears to be a slight misspelling of the Latin noun *perpetuitas* 'continuity'.[2] So, why did none of the other western mints that struck silver issues during this period –Aquileia, Lyon, Rome, Sirmium, Siscia, Thessalonica – not strike this type too, not to mention the sole eastern mint that also struck silver during this period – Constantinople? And what is the significance of this type?

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[1] See Cuddeford 2023 on *RIC* IX, Trier nos. 56 a-c. The weight of these coins seems a little light for a *siliqua*, so Cuddeford suggests that this type may be a *⅓ miliarensis* instead.

[2] This sort of error provides an insight into the pronunciation of Latin and was by no means unique. For further examples of coin legends that substitute E for I, and similar errors, see Kent 1993. For the meaning of *perpetuitas*, see Glare 2012², p. 1487.

Fig. 1 – Siliqua in the name of Gratian (16 mm, 1.42 g), Trier (RIC IX, no. 56a). Ex CNG, Auction 115 (16/IX/2020), lot 735 (scale 200%).

Cuddeford assumed that, since the type was struck at Trier alone, it probably celebrated an event that was relevant to that city alone, but that is not necessarily the case.[3] The rarity of the type could point to a sudden interruption of the production of what had intended to be a more extensive issue rather than the completion of an unusually small issue. In that case, it is possible that the type began to be struck in Trier first before the commencement of striking elsewhere also, but that something unexpected then happened that not only stopped the striking of this type in Trier but also prevented the planned commencement of its striking elsewhere. As to the nature of this unexpected event, it would have to have been of extreme political importance to have interrupted the production of coinage in this manner, but one such event does suggest itself: the rebellion by Magnus Maximus, a senior Roman commander in Britain, during the late summer of 383, resulting in the killing of the senior western emperor Gratian near Lyon on 25 August.[4] If one accepts the possibility that this rebellion may have interrupted the production of this type, and if this type does celebrate a specific event, then this event probably occurred sometime earlier during 383.

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[3] See Cuddeford 2023, p. 193, arguing that it commemorated 'an event specific to Trier: perhaps the defeat of the Greuthungi Goths?', leading to the conclusion that 'This would make 380 the most likely year of issue'. But the defeat of the Greuthungi Goths was of empire-wide significance, a rare piece of good news at a time of continuing military crisis in the Balkans, and there is no reason why it should have been celebrated at Trier alone. More importantly, types that celebrated military victory, even if only in the broadest of senses, were not usually so vague and ambiguous about this fact, as the numerous types whose legends include the term VICTORIA easily prove. On the celebration of victory on Roman coinage, see Betjes 2022, p. 153-230. Arguing similarly, Pearce, *RIC* IX, p. xl, claims that this type 'must refer to the passing of the Gothic danger', by which he presumably means that it celebrates the signing of the treaty between Theodosius I and the Goths on 3 October 382. Christiansen & Sebesta 1985, p. 213, claim that this type was 'probably struck soon after Theodosius' accession to proclaim the refusal of the Romans to accept defeat and to assert the continuity of the imperial power'. That would make it all the stranger that this type was struck in Trier alone.

[4] For the date of the death of Gratian, see *Consularia Constantinopolitana* s.a. 383. The evidence for the rebellion is poor, but if Zosimus (*Historia nova* 4.35.4) can be believed, the Roman troops based in Germany defected to Magnus Maximus immediately upon his arrival on the continent from Britain. On the pre-imperial career of Magnus Maximus, see Birley 2005, p. 443-450, who identifies him as *dux Britanniarum*.

Alternatively, the fact that the mint at Trier was alone in striking this type may suggest that it had acted without due authorization from Gratian, away in northern Italy at the time, in a small act of disobedience indicative of the larger discontent with him prior to the rebellion against him by Magnus Maximus, but a disobedience without repercussions because of this rebellion, if it was not actually provoked by news of the start of this rebellion in Britain.[5] Such an act would have been consistent with the independent-mindedness of many of Gratian's senior officials and the general lack of respect shown towards him throughout his reign, whether because of his youth, inexperience, or perceived lack of seriousness.[6] In either case, the striking of this type arguably belongs to the last weeks of the recognition of Gratian's rule in Trier.

One turns next to the significance of the phoenix on the reverse of this type. As a symbol, the importance of the phoenix lay in the fact that this bird was thought to be able to die and be reborn again in a continuous cycle so that it lived forever.[7] The last time that a phoenix had been used as the main device on the reverse of a coin was as part of the FEL TEMP REPARATIO 'Restoration of Happy Times' series of coins introduced during a great reform of the base metal coinage in 348.[8] One of the two new types of Æ 3 depicted a nimbate phoenix, facing right, standing on either a group of rocks or a zoned globe, all surrounded by the legend FEL TEMP REPARATIO (Fig. 2a). This legend makes it clear that the phoenix symbolizes the renewal of the ages and it is hardly a coincidence that this type was introduced as part of a reform of the coinage that coincided with the eleven-hundredth anniversary of the foundation of Rome.[9] In this case, therefore, the phoenix seems to act as a symbol of a newly restored Golden Age.[10] However, the last time before this that a phoenix had

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[5] Gratian was in northern Italy still, at Verona, as late as 16 June 383. See Seeck 1919, p. 262.

[6] Gratian was a child-emperor, raised to the rank of Augustus at the age of 8 in 367, and only 16 by the death of his father Valentinian I in 375. In their first and greatest display of disrespect towards him, a group of senior officials hailed his younger half-brother Valentinian II as Augustus without his permission immediately after the death of their father. On this, see McEvoy 2013, p. 54-60. It is probable also that his new eastern colleague Theodosius I was forced upon him in a similar manner in January 379. See Sivan 1996. On Gratian's lack of seriousness, see Amm. Marc. 31.10.18-19.

[7] For a detailed analysis of ancient traditions concerning the phoenix, see Van den Broek 1972.

[8] For a review of the large literature on this series, see Vaneerdewegh 2017.

[9] Cuddeford 1993, p. 190, cites Kent, *RIC* VIII, p. 36, in support of the idea that the phoenix symbolizes 'imperial succession', but that is not what Kent says. He says that the phoenix 'may have been a well-understood symbol of the dynasty'. Neither suggestion is convincing. In the first case, it seems odd that the two remaining sons of Constantine I should have used the phoenix to commemorate their succession to their father about 10 years later when they had not done so on the coinage in 337 itself. In the second case, the dynasty did not need another symbol since it already had the chi-rho sign (☧).

[10] For a survey of the use of the phoenix upon the coinage until the end of the 3rd century, see Barker 2020, p. 122-132. The new age celebrated by the phoenix is always assumed to be a Golden Age, but rarely specifically described as such. Hadrian struck an *aureus* including

been used as the main device on the reverse of a coin had been in 117 on *aurei* struck at Rome under Hadrian in the name of his deified predecessor Trajan.[11] In this case, a nimbate phoenix had been depicted, facing right, either standing on a branch or with no further attributes, and without an accompanying legend. The fact that this type was only struck in the name of the deified Trajan suggests that its primary purpose was to stress the eternal afterlife of the newly deified emperor even if Hadrian did soon begin to use coin types to represent his rule as a new Golden Age.[12] In summary, in the past, the symbol of the phoenix, when used as the main device on the reverse of coins, had been used for two very different purposes, to celebrate either some imagined renewal of the state or the eternal afterlife of a recently deceased person.

Fig. 2a – Æ 3 in the name of Constantius II (19 mm, 2.67 g), Trier (RIC VIII, no. 237). Ex CNG, E-Auction 527 (16/XI/2022), lot 434 (scale 200%).

Fig. 2b – Aureus in the name of the deified Trajan (19 mm, 6.99 g), Rome (RIC II·3, no. 2454). Ex CNG, Auction 94 (18/IX/2013), lot 1167 (scale 200%).

the legend SAEC AVR, abbreviating *saeculum aureum* 'Golden Age', in the exergue beneath a depiction of Aion, or the genius of the Golden Age, holding a phoenix on a globe. See *RIC* II·3, nos. 296-297. More often, the significance of the phoenix as a symbol of the Golden Age can only be confirmed by the contemporaneous production of other reverse types celebrating associated themes of prosperity and fertility.

[11] *RIC* II·3, nos. 2453-2455.

[12] Abdy, *RIC* II·3, p. 38.

The realization that a phoenix could be used for two very different symbolic purposes means that the interpretation of its significance of the type from Trier is less certain than has sometimes been assumed. It does not necessarily celebrate some real or imagined imperial achievement as proof that a new Golden Age is at hand. On the contrary, the fact that the reverse legend contains nothing to suggest periods of time, happiness, or renewal, tells strongly in support of the idea that this type celebrates not some imagined renewal of the state but the eternal afterlife of some recently deceased figure. Obviously, this person would have to have been of the highest social rank for their death to be marked in this manner, most likely a senior member of the imperial family, so the next question is whether Gratian did suffer such a loss during the period 379-383. He did. The corpse of his wife Constantia reached Constantinople on 31 August 383 and was buried there on 1 December.[13] It is not clear when, where or how Constantia died. She had presumably died several months before 31 August, probably at Milan where Gratian had spent the winter of 382/383, but one cannot exclude the possibility that she died at Trier.[14] Whatever the case, she was certainly important enough that Gratian, or some of his senior officials, may have felt it necessary to mark her passing on the coinage. Her importance lay in the fact not so much that she was the wife of Gratian but that she was the only child of the emperor Constantius II (337-361), a grandchild of the emperor Constantine I (306-337), and a great-grandchild of the emperor Constantius I (305-306). The emperor Valentinian I had married his son Gratian to her in 374 to cement the former's claim to the throne and to add some prestige to a dynasty that was sorely lacking in such.[15] Hence, Gratian, or some of his senior officials, may well have thought it politic to assuage popular feeling, and feeling within the army also, by honouring the memory of his deceased wife on the coinage.

At a superficial level, the PERPETVETAS type continues the commemoration of a deceased person in the same way that Hadrian had commemorated Trajan by means of *aurei* depicting a phoenix, but a religious revolution had occurred in the meantime and Christians did not read the same significance

[13] For these dates, see *Chronicon Paschale* s.a. 383. For a comprehensive discussion of the scanty evidence for the life of Constantia, see McEvoy 2016.

[14] On the whereabouts of Gratian, firmly attested at Milan between 22 November 382 and 2 May 383, see Seeck 1919, p. 260-262. The whereabouts of Constantia at her death depends on the nature of her relationship with Gratian. The fact that Gratian had already remarried to a certain Laeta (Zosimus, *Historia nova* 5.39.4) by the time of his death on 25 August suggests that there may have been problems. The claim by Philostorgius (*Historia ecclesiastica* 10.5) that Gratian was like the emperor Nero (54-68), encourages suspicions concerning the state of the marriage, since Nero was famous for his unfaithfulness to his first wife Octavia and his killing of his second wife Poppaea Sabina. The apparent failure of Constantia to produce any children for Gratian, even after almost a decade of marriage, would certainly have placed the marriage under stress.

[15] She was travelling to marry Gratian when she was almost captured by the Quadi in 374 (Amm. Marc. 29.6.7).

into the phoenix as traditional pagans had done. For pagans, the importance of the phoenix lay in the very fact of its eternal existence, while the way that it achieved this eternal life did not really matter. For Christians, however, the way that it achieved this eternal life, through the resurrection of the body, was of vital importance because it could be used as a symbol, and a proof even, of one of their key religious doctrines, the resurrection of the body at the end of the world.[16] Ambrose, bishop of Milan (374-397), demonstrates the relevance of the story of the phoenix to Christians when he draws upon this myth to prove the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead in a sermon that he delivered at a mass in honour of his deceased brother Satyrus at Milan in 378, as follows:

> "There is a bird in Arabia called the phoenix. After it dies, it comes back to life, restored by the renovating fluid in its own flesh. Shall we believe that men alone are not restored to life again? Now, from the many oral and authoritative reports written on this matter, we know that the bird in question has a fixed life span of five hundred years, … Thus, through the resurrection of the phoenix the inhabitants of those regions know that five hundred years have elapsed. Therefore, for that bird the five-hundredth year is that of its resurrection, and, for us, the thousandth year. His resurrections occur within the period of this world, but our resurrection will come at the consummation of the world."[17]

In the light of this sermon, and other Christian writings, there can be no doubt, that most educated Christians of Gratian's era would easily have recognized the phoenix as an appropriate symbol to use of someone who had died but would eventually enjoy the resurrection of the body at the end of the world.[18]

One obvious difference between the *aurei* struck by Hadrian in honour of Trajan and the PERPETVITAS type lies in the nature of the obverse. It is easy to recognize that the *aurei* have been struck in honour of Trajan because it is his bust that appears on the obverse rather than that of the current emperor and the legend refers to his divine status, a status only obtained after death. However, this was possible for Trajan because he had enjoyed the status of Augustus, while Constantia had never been raised to rank as Augusta despite her impeccable pedigree, so there was no question of placing her bust on the coinage whether living or dead. This is the important difference also between her and both Theodora and Helena, the two successive wives of Constantius I, whose memories were honoured on bronze coins struck at Trier, Rome, and Constantinople following the death of Constantine I in 337, the last imperial

[16] On the origin and development of this doctrine, see Lehtipuu 2015.

[17] Ambrose, *De excessu fratris* 2.59. Translation from Sullivan & McGuire 1953, p. 221-222.

[18] The fact that Eusebius of Caesarea specifically rejects a comparison of the deceased Constantine I to a phoenix (*Vita Constantini* 4.72) proves that someone was using it to symbolize him after his death, even if this symbolism has left no trace in contemporary coinage.

women to be honoured in this way.[19] Their busts could be depicted on the coinage because both had received the title of Augusta. However, the absence of Constantia's name or bust should not have prevented those who initially received the PERPETVETAS type *siliquae* from recognizing the significance of this type. This is because they did not receive these coins in a social and political vacuum. Rather, they received them at a time when the death of the empress was a main item of news so that, recognizing the funereal symbolism of the phoenix, they could easily understand that this type was struck in her honour even if she was not specifically named on it. Finally, it is worth noting that while the Latin terms *perpetuitas* 'continuity' and *constantia* 'changelessness' are certainly not synonyms, they do describe closely related concepts in that for something to be perpetual it must also be constant, unchanging in the very act of existence at least.[20] Hence, the legend PERPETVETAS may represent a form of play upon the name of Constantia, and so indirectly invoke her name.

The last time that the term PERPETVITAS had been used on the coinage was on an Æ 3 of Valentinian I known from a single example struck in Sirmium.[21] In this case, the reverse legend PERPETVITAS IMPERII surrounds a depiction of the emperor standing and holding a shield decorated with a swastika while the hand of God descends from heaven before him. It expresses a wish for the continuity of either the empire or the rule of Valentinian, but there is nothing to connect this type to the type from Trier beyond the mere use of the noun *perpetuitas* and no need to do so. They do not necessarily celebrate the same thing or type of thing. The Christianization of the empire during the 4th century had resulted in the rejection of the depiction of most of the gods or goddesses that had traditionally personified virtues or other desirable traits. Earlier types celebrating the *perpetuitas* of the emperor normally depict the goddess Perpetuitas as a standing figure with a plain globe in her outstretched right hand and with a long sceptre balanced in the crook of her left arm as she leans against a waist-high column. Curiously, she is never associated with a phoenix. In contrast, a small phoenix is often depicted upon the globe held by the goddess Aeternitas. Of most relevance here is the fact that coins struck in the name of the deified Faustina the Elder, wife of Antoninus Pius (138-161), sometimes depict a phoenix upon the globe held by Aeternitas (Fig. 3).[22] Similarly, coins struck in the name of the deified Faustina

[19] *RIC* VIII, Trier nos. 42-43, 47-48, 55-56, 63-65, 78-79, 90-91; Rome nos. 27-28, 53-54; Constantinople nos. 33-36, 48-51. The memories of these women seem to have been honoured together as part of a campaign to reassure the public that the different branches of the Constantinian dynasty were at peace, so that there was no danger of civil war. See Woods 2011, p. 193-194.

[20] For the meaning of *constantia*, see Glare 2012, p. 1487.

[21] *RIC* IX, Sirmium no. 5. For discussion, see Pearce 1938.

[22] *RIC* III, Antoninus Pius nos. 347, 833, 1103-1105, 1156-1157.

the Younger, wife of Marcus Aurelius (161-180), may also depict a phoenix upon the globe held by Aeternitas.[23] It seems, therefore, that the PERPETVETAS type from Trier associates *perpetuitas* with a symbol that had been more often associated with *aeternitas* instead, but little distinction was probably drawn between these terms outside of technical philosophical works.[24] In any case, the use of the phoenix on the *aurei* struck in honour of the deified Trajan and on the coins struck in honour of the deified Faustinas prove a tradition of using the phoenix in order to honour a deceased member of the imperial family regardless of the precise term used to describe their continued existence in the heavenly realm.

Fig. 3 – Sestertius in the name of the deified Faustina the Elder (32 mm, 25.05 g), Rome (RIC III, no. 1103a). Ex CNG, Triton XXIII (14/I/2020), lot 757 (scale 150%).

Finally, one should acknowledge that the phoenix was not necessarily the only symbol by which the official responsible for this reverse type might have chosen to allude to the death of Constantia. During late antiquity, one of the more important funereal symbols, appearing in frescoes in tombs or carved on sarcophagi, whether pagan or Christian, was the peacock, widely regarded as a symbol of the immortality of the soul.[25] One might have expected, therefore, that the person responsible for this reverse type would have chosen a peacock rather than a phoenix by which to allude to the death of Constantia, even more so since the peacock had figured largely on various coins struck in honour of deceased empresses since the late 1st century AD.[26] However, the reason why the peacock was not chosen in this case may be because it was the main device on numerous types struck to commemorate the *consecratio*, that is, deification of these empresses. This added association between the peacock

[23] *RIC* III, Marcus Aurelius nos. 740, 1693, 1696.

[24] Boethius distinguishes between *perpetuitas* and *aeternitas* drawing on a Platonic tradition, probably Plotinus. See Karfíková 2011, p. 445-446.

[25] See Anđelković, Rogić & Nikolić 2010.

[26] On the use of the peacock on Roman imperial coins, see Betjes & Foubert 2024.

and *consecratio*, particularly in a numismatic context, may have inclined the relevant official to prefer a phoenix instead in this case due to the new Christian context. The idea that the symbol should be an exotic bird has been retained, perhaps knowingly, but the identity of the bird has been changed.

In conclusion, it is arguable that either Gratian or senior officials at Trier may have ordered the striking of the PERPETVETAS type *siliqua* to honour the memory of his recently deceased wife Constantia. If Gratian had personally ordered the striking of this type, then the rebellion by Magnus Maximus may have stopped its production before any mint other than Trier had had the opportunity to begin striking it. If, on the other hand, senior officials at Trier had struck this type without the proper authorization, then there is no reason why any other mints should have struck it also. The reason why Maximus stopped the production of the PERPETVETAS type at Trier, even though he maintained the production of most of the other coin types that had been struck under Gratian, was because it was different to these other types. Unlike them, it was not a generic type in celebration of some vague idea of courage or harmony, but a celebration of a specific event intimately connected to the emperor whom Maximus had just had killed, the memory of his wife Constantia. As such, it was a reminder of a past that Maximus now wanted to be forgotten as soon as possible.

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