

Caligula's radiate crown

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CALIGULA'S RADIATE CROWN

Brooks Emmons Levy

In SM 28/110, 1978, 39-44, H.-M. von Kaenel advanced a new interpretation of the *dupondii* issued by Gaius (Caligula) whose obverse type is a radiate head of Augustus, and whose reverse shows a togate figure, holding branch and globe, seated in a curule chair¹. It has usually been assumed that the seated figure on the reverse, like the obverse portrait, represents Divus Augustus, or rather a statue of him voted by the three constituent bodies of the Roman state; the reverse legend, «By Common Consent of the Senate, Knights, and Roman People», has been explained as a reference to this honor².

¹ BMC I, 160/88-92; RIC I², 112/56. Attribution of the issue to Gaius' reign now seems certain: see H. Chantraine, *Die antiken Fundmünzen von Neuss. Novaesium VIII* (1982) 20-21. The obverse legend is DIVVS•AVGVSTVS, S - C, that of the reverse CONSENSV•SENAT•ET•EQ•ORDIN•P•Q•R.

² See von Kaenel, loc. cit., 43 note 24. The description of it as a statue (BMC I, cxlvii) apparently goes back to I. Eckhel, *Doctrina Numorum Veterum VI*² (1828) 126.

Von Kaenel proposes that the seated figure should be identified not as Augustus but as Gaius³. He has offered two arguments: first, that on a few of the reverses one can recognize Gaius' distinctive features; second, that the accompanying legend is especially suited to the circumstances of his accession. As Dio tells us, the event was attended by an irruption into the senate-house of *equites* and *populus*⁴, and in von Kaenel's view it is to this, not to the award of an honorific statue, that the legend CONSENSV • SENAT • ET • EQ • ORDIN • P • Q • R must refer⁵.

Given the ambiguous nature of so many Roman imperial coin portraits⁶, von Kaenel's first argument may fail to convince us entirely. But another point too can be made in favor of his identification of the seated figure: on coin issues before the Flavian era a curule chair is the seat of the living princeps, while that of Divus Augustus is a throne⁷. The seated figure should, then, be Gaius. And surely von Kaenel's explanation of the CONSENSV legend is more attractive than the traditional one, particularly now that a recent article by Jakobson and Cotton has emphasized the significant background of the incident in the senate-house⁸. They propose that it followed an initial refusal by Gaius of the principate⁹. Thus it (like his refusal) may have been a staged incident, meant to demonstrate universal support for a relatively inexperienced candidate. Such an event seems apt for «propagandist» commemoration on coinage, and there is in fact some indication that the CONSENSV issue was meant to be widely distributed¹⁰.

The present note is intended to draw attention to two examples in Princeton, one in the University Library, one in a private collection, which reveal an interesting detail of the reverse type that has so far escaped notice. On both, the seated figure wears a

³ As he observes, loc. cit., 40, this identification was already made in the auction catalogue Münzen und Medaillen AG Basel 43 (12–13.11.1970), no. 289, and by D. Mannsperger in ANRW II.1 (1974) 950, note 77. Mannsperger's view that type and legend illustrate «*die wiederhergestellte Eintracht des Staates*» is unlikely: one would expect CONCORDIA, not CONSENSV. And the «*Schale der Concordia*» that Mannsperger saw in the figure's left hand is surely a globe, not a *patera*; cf. von Kaenel, loc. cit., 42. On Roman coinage, *pateras* are held in the right hand.

⁴ Dio 59.6.1.; Suetonius, *Gaius Caligula* 14.1, speaks of the irruption, but its perpetrators are called simply *turba*.

⁵ P. Grenade, *Essai sur les origines du principat* (1961) 283, had already interpreted the legend in this way, but, relying on the BMC description, continued to see the seated figure as Divus Augustus. He did not attempt to explain why it should be coupled with an inscription referring to Gaius, but this evidently would corroborate his view that Gaius' approach to the principate was in every way modelled on that of the first princeps.

⁶ For example, Octavian-Veiovis: BMC I, 104/637; Augustus-Tiberius, *ibid.* 146/1–5. See von Kaenel, loc. cit., 44 note 31.

⁷ This point was made by H. Kùthmann, JNG 10, 1959/60, 56–57; he identified the seated figure of the CONSENSV *dupondii* as Claudius.

⁸ A. Jakobson and H. Cotton, *Caligula's Recusatio Imperii*, *Historia* 34, 1985, 497–503.

⁹ Grenade's detailed examination of Gaius' accession, op. cit. 271–293, took all the evidence into account but, because there is no explicit mention of *recusatio* in the ancient sources, did not suggest this possibility. Earlier, however (*ibid.* 229), Grenade had in a general way drawn the connection between *recusatio* and *consensus*; on this see too J. Béranger, *Le refus du pouvoir*, *Museum Helveticum* 5, 1948, esp. 187–188.

¹⁰ Thirty-nine examples were found in the legionary camp at Vindonissa, twenty-seven at Novaesium: C. Kraay, *Die Münzfunde von Vindonissa* (1962) nos. 4607–4646; H. Chantraine, op. cit. (note 1 above) nos. 3011–3038. The fact that ancient imitations are not uncommon suggests the issue was well-known.



Fig. 1



1:1



Fig. 2

radiate crown¹¹. Like that of Divus Augustus on the obverse of the same issue, this crown is very unobtrusively rendered, and of course on a much smaller scale than that of the obverse. Perhaps it is not surprising that in over a hundred examples illustrated in published catalogues the detail is imperceptible, and is not mentioned in the descriptions accompanying the illustrations¹². In the Princeton University Library example the crown, though quite obvious in an enlargement (fig. 1), can barely be made out in the catalogue photograph (fig. 2)¹³. But there is other evidence of its presence, which can easily be seen even in a natural-size illustration: the die-cutter has shortened the vertical bar of the T in ET to make space for its rays. In the second Princeton piece, where the detail is even harder to make out, the entire letter T has been slightly raised (fig. 3).

¹¹ It is possible but not certain that they share a reverse die (reworked), and the two obverses are, if not from the same die, very close in style. But it is fortuitous that both are in Princeton: the privately owned piece is a recent acquisition, while the other has been in the Library collection for over half a century. The latter has what seems to be a modern dark patina applied after cleaning; the privately owned piece has been cleaned but has no patina.

¹² For one piece in which the crown is quite evident, see the catalogue of the Vierordt sale: Schulman 5.3.1923, no. 573. A considerable sample of catalogue material is reproduced in A. Banti and L. Simonetti, CNR VI (1974) 65-72.

¹³ B. E. Levy and P. C. V. Bastien, *Roman Coins in the Princeton University Library I* (1985) 70/866, pl. 12.



Fig. 3

The matter is not so simple, however, for in more than fifty examples examined personally, not in photographs, by the present writer, little or no trace of a radiate crown could be seen¹⁴. A partial explanation lies at hand: the «improvement» of coins, particularly those of a medallionic nature, has been practised at least since the seventeenth century¹⁵. Surely this tiny crown would in the average «improver's» judgment look like scruffily rendered hair to be tidied off. That may have been the case, for example, with one recently published piece on which the head of the seated figure, directly below a tell-tale shortened T, looks almost as if it had been scalped (fig. 4)¹⁶.



Fig. 4

¹⁴ My thanks to the curators of collections visited in the course of this inquiry: H.D. and S. Schultz (Berlin DDR), T. Volk (Cambridge), L. Tondo (Florence), A. Burnett (London), R. Martini (Milan), D. Klose and B. Overbeck (Munich), W.E. Metcalf (New York), M. Amandry (Paris), A. Saccocci (Padova), A.S. Fava (Turin), M. Tombolani (Venice), G. Dembski (Vienna). I owe thanks also to K. Steiglitz for material help and stimulating discussion.

¹⁵ See the observations of F. Gnechi in connection with his study of medallions, RIN 23, 1910, 13; and P. Lederer's report of the radiate crown tooled off Vespasianic *sestertii*, ZfN 40, 1930, 45.

¹⁶ Coll. Armand Trampitsch, Monaco, 13-14.12.1986, no.597; the style is very like that of the two Princeton examples. Von Kaenel's fig.2 (Münzen und Medaillen AG Basel 43, 12-13.11.1970, no.289) offers another possible case of «improvement»: in his enlargement, it looks as if the field surrounding the T of ET may have been deepened, and an originally short vertical stroke lengthened. Is the laureate crown also a tooled addition?

Yet tell-tale letters are the exception in this issue, and it seems probable that on most pieces there was no radiate crown to begin with. Either the die-cutter simply omitted it – one can imagine the difficulty of engraving it on this small scale – or, for at least part of the period of issue, it did not form part of the official design. But in any case we should not assume from the scarcity of recognizable examples that the Princeton pieces simply represent die-cutter's aberrations¹⁷. Nor should we revert to the traditional idea that the figure does after all represent the deified Augustus, who was normally shown radiate (the first living princeps to appear radiate on Roman coinage, according to a commonly accepted view, was Nero)¹⁸.



Fig. 5

1:1



Fig. 6

For in fact, when we turn to the provincial city coinages of the empire, we find that the bronze issues of three or four mints show Gaius with this attribute. One is Alexandria: it is the only relatively well-known instance, but also the only doubtful one, since the head on these small pieces may actually be that of Helios¹⁹. But there is no doubt about three issues from the province of Asia: Magnesia ad Sipylum, with its spiky Hellenistic-looking crown (fig. 5)²⁰, Smyrna, which adds rays to an already laureate head (fig. 6)²¹, and Aizanoi²². These radiate portraits of Gaius deserve attention, for they apparently represent the first use of the crown by a living princeps, both on provincial coinage and, as we can now surmise, on that of Rome itself. For one thing, they make Nero's assumption of it on Western issues seem a less radical innovation than is generally supposed, and render more understandable its trivialization, a year after its first appearance on his Western obverses, as the value-mark of the double unit²³. The subject needs more extensive treatment, but some initial speculations on the meaning behind Gaius' use of the attribute may be offered here.

Since his reign was short, most provincial coinages in Gaius' name can reasonably be characterized as accession issues, a parallel phenomenon to the honorific inscrip-

¹⁷ We might suspect this (as von Kaenel has observed to me by letter) if the pieces were irregular in other ways. But the style seems perfectly «Roman».

¹⁸ Much numismatic material has been collected by P. Bastien, *Couronne radiée et buste monétaire impérial*, *Studia ... Naster* (1982) 263–272.

¹⁹ Dattari 7/108–109, pl.I; cited in E. M. Smallwood, *Documents illustrating the Reigns of Gaius Claudius and Nero* (1967) no.126. The identification with Gaius is questioned by Dattari, but accepted by M. Charlesworth, *Cambridge Ancient History X* (1952) 654, note 1.

²⁰ BMC 145/49–51 (example illustrated here: Berlin).

²¹ BMC 270/279–280 (example illustrated here: Munich).

²² BMC 32/65–66; McClean 231/8742, pl.307 no.13. The star juxtaposed to Gaius' portrait on coinage of Miletus and Philadelphia is probably a related phenomenon.

²³ The latest study of Nero's Roman and Gallic issues dates the introduction of the radiate crown to 63 A.D.: D. MacDowall, *The Western Coinages of Nero* (1979), 171, 177.

tions produced for him by cities such as Assos (SIG³ 797 = IGR IV 251) or Kyzikos (SIG³ 798 = IGR IV 145). Those inscriptions call him «Deity most Manifest», «the New Sun» (*Epiphanestatos Theos, Neos Helios*). They obviously reflect the standard rhetoric used in the Greek East at the arrival or accession of powerful individuals. (Horace, *Serm.* I.7.22–25, implies that images of solar and stellar epiphany already seemed a *cliché* in this context by the end of the Republican era, but in the late third or early fourth century A.D. Menander Rhetor was still recommending «brilliant ray of the sun», «highly visible star», as appropriate similes to apply to visiting officials²⁴.) The radiate crowns of Gaius' Greek coinage can be seen as visual counterparts to the routine verbal flattery produced at his accession. Comparable rhetoric was addressed to Nero²⁵, and it may be significant that the first representation of the latter with a radiate crown comes as early as 56/57 A.D., on the reverse of an accession issue at Alexandria (fig. 7)²⁶.



Fig. 7

Not only in the Greek East but at Rome, Gaius' succession to the principate seems to have evoked solar imagery. Tacitus and Dio assign to the moribund Tiberius a remark characterizing himself as the «setting» and Gaius as the «rising one»²⁷. The radiate crown Gaius wears on the reverse of the *CONSENSV dupondii*, a coin type surely associated with the events of his accession, can perhaps be correlated, like those of his Greek coinage, with the rhetoric of imperial epiphany²⁸. Seen as a visual counterpart

²⁴ Περὶ ἐπιβατηρίου 378.11, 381.12.

²⁵ *Neos Helios* at Sagalassos (IGR III 147/345) and Prostanna (SEG 18, 188/566). Not all instances necessarily commemorate accession: Nero is still *Neos Helios* at Acraephia in late 66 or 67 A.D. (SIG³ 814).

²⁶ Dattari 12–13/200–203 (example illustrated here: Princeton University Library). Egypt issued no coinage for Nero until his third regnal year (56/57 A.D.); this reverse, produced from his third to his sixth, may therefore be considered an accession type. It seems worthwhile to point out the similarity of the coin type to the youthful seated Nero of the Cologne cameo, most recently illustrated by A. S. Megow, *Kameen von Augustus bis Alexander Severus*, AMuGS XI (1987) 213–214, pl.35, 1–2. On the cameo Nero is half-draped, with a «bib» aegis, and a star appears above his laureate head; the *aplustre* (?) held in his left hand would be appropriate to an Alexandrian context.

²⁷ Tacitus, *Ann.* 6.46; Dio 58.28.4. Solar images had been associated with Augustus, e.g. Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 94.4. and 5 (his father's dreams), 95 (a nimbed sun at his entry into Rome); cf. too his complicated connections with the *sidus Iulium*: Pliny, *NH* 2.94.

²⁸ E. Kantorowicz, *Oriens Augusti*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 17, 1963, 119–133, examines the association of solar imagery with imperial accessions and epiphanies. His detailed inquiry starts only with the second century A.D.; a fuller investigation of the first-century and Hellenistic evidence would probably be rewarding.

of oral or written panegyric, it of course provides no good evidence that Gaius actually wore such a thing; Philo's testimony to the contrary is itself highly rhetorical, and is not that of a dispassionate witness²⁹. And despite the association with Helios, its appearance on the *dupondii* should not be taken as an assertion of Gaius' divinity, hardly possible at Rome, but, at most, of divine sanction for his rule. Stories of a flame, nimbus, or glow around the head, which is probably what the attribute represents here³⁰, were often thought to mean this in antiquity. Thus the crown of the CONSENSV *dupondii* may supply the missing element in still another commonplace of imperial panegyric, already used by Valerius Maximus of Tiberius: that he ruled by the consent of gods and men, *consensus deorum hominumque*³¹.

One can imagine that the central mint's adoption of the radiate crown to mean «divine election» (if the interpretation suggested here is correct) could have aroused criticism – as a distasteful borrowing from the iconography of Hellenistic kingship, or as the usurpation of an attribute hitherto reserved, at Rome, for the deified Augustus³². If so, we might conjecture that the few CONSENSV *dupondii* with radiate figure on the reverse came at the beginning of the issue, and that the design was later modified in deference to public opinion. On the other hand we might set them late, seeing in them a manifestation of Gaius' gradual self-exaltation, which is well attested in the literary sources but otherwise absent from his coinage³³. A complete collection of extant pieces would perhaps supply an answer, since even a cursory examination suggests that these *dupondii*, like Gaius' Agrippa *asses*, fall into stylistic groups³⁴. But like the Agrippa *asses* they appear to offer almost no clues to their internal chronological arrangement, and it is more likely that such a collection would not settle the question of relative order to the satisfaction of all. Their relationship to the radiate portraits on Gaius' provincial issues is another question of great interest, but one which in the present state of our knowledge seems impossible to answer.

²⁹ *Leg. ad Gaium* 13.95. The next literary testimony for the actual wearing of a radiate crown by an emperor is SHA *Gallienus* 16.4.

³⁰ How was a nimbus to be represented from the side? Coin types showing nimbus and rays in combination suggest they could be two ways of representing the same thing: e.g. Antony's *denarii* with facing bust of Sol (RRC 512/496); bronzes of Antoninus Pius showing him with a composite crown of nimbus and rays (BMC IV 269/1666–1667, pl.40, 11).

³¹ Val. Max. praef.; cf. Béranger, loc. cit. (note 9 above), 188.

³² This might account for its delayed introduction on Nero's Western coinage. It is interesting that at the mint of Lugdunum the crown was replaced after a year's use as the sign of the double unit, and an alternative system adopted: laurel wreath for the double unit (*dupondius*), bare head for the unit (*as*). Was Nero's radiate crown unacceptable in Gaul? Cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 16.5, on the unfavorable reaction of North Italians and provincials (presumably Western) to the theatrical excesses of Nero's last years.

³³ A point often made: see R. Fears, ANRW II.17 (1981) 72, note 347.

³⁴ For the stylistic grouping of the *asses* see, most recently, J. Nicols, The Chronology and Significance of the M. Agrippa *Asses*, ANS MN 20 (1974) 65–86. W. Szaivert, *Moneta Imperii Romani* III (1981) 46, has suggested that the production of Gaius' CONSENSV *dupondii* was limited to his first year of rule. In view of the apparent size and variety of the issue, this seems doubtful. C.H.V. Sutherland, RIC I² (1984) 106, supposes it was an extended issue; von Kaenel, SNR 66, 1987, 151, reserves judgment.