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Mysterious letters punched into a supposed sestertius of Nero

Bericht

Although to keep things simple I have left my name by itself as the author of this article, it will be clear to the reader that I have had a great deal of help, which has been appropriately acknowledged.

Some years ago I acquired what, in my innocence, I thought might be a normal *sestertius* of Nero, its reverse type a *decursio* scene showing the emperor riding on a horse and a soldier riding a little behind him. This commemorated the emperor's leading a cavalry parade in the Circus Maximus at Rome (no. 142, described on p. 226 of Volume I of *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*). (Photo: Richard Small)



I thought that there was nothing unusual about this coin, except for one thing. In a blank space near the edge of the reverse, at about 1.00 on a clock dial, the three letters F R P had been stamped into it, with letters that looked very modern, rather than ancient. My conclusion was that the most likely explanation for this was that it represented the name of a modern owner of the coin, and was placed on it to prove ownership, in case it was stolen.

At first this seemed to be a good explanation. There are several examples of marks of ownership placed on coins. For example, as Gilles Bransbourg informs me, The American Numismatic Society has in its collection a *sestertius* of Gordian I which may have once been owned by Queen Christina of Sweden, who reigned from 1626 to 1689 and was an avid coin collector. This is shown here, and may also be viewed on line at: <<https://www.cngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=231824>>



It is marked with a crowned capital C behind the emperor's head on the obverse. Again, as Richard Abdy informs me, the Coin Room of the British Museum has a brass medallion of Otacilia, with her bust on the obverse and busts of her husband Philip I and son Philip II on the reverse. Behind the empress's head there is an oval appliqué showing an eagle, the mark of the Gonzaga family of Mantua. I have not been able to find a copy of this coin on line, but a contorniate of Nero bears the same sort of appliqué, and may be seen at: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_R-4856>.

But these both stand out from the coins, and have been added by some process that it seems has not been understood yet.

After this, however, an alternative explanation of the letters F R P on this supposed *sestertius* of Nero was suggested. Bernhard Woytek pointed out to me that the coin was a cast modern fake, and the letter might be related to this. This had not occurred to me, because in matters of this kind I am very inexperienced, but when I looked at it, I could see that the irregularities of its background surfaces, although they were lower than the higher parts, showed that the coin had not been stamped between dies.

François de Callatay provided me with information on what might be a similar situation. A firm called Westair Reproductions Limited, incorporated in 1972, produced a few copies of Greek and Roman coins on which the letters W R L had been stamped in the same way. However, no museum or business producing reproductions seems to have used the letters F R P.

After that, something else happened. I visit a podiatrist, Dr Elan Silver, occasionally, and I like to talk about something interesting while he is doing what can't be a very exciting job, so I showed him the coin. He is very sharp-eyed, and noticed that there was something else stamped into the obverse of the coin, at the top of Nero's shoulder. The letters here are F R P again, but in this case they are very hard to see, because they are smaller, and have been impressed into an incuse rectangle, rather than appearing to have been punched into the coin singly, perhaps using a single punch die. I have no explanation for this, and since the mark is so small, it might not have

been noticed by the person who punched the separate letters into the reverse of the coin. This suggests that this might have been done at some time earlier than the letters punched into the reverse, and the smaller mark had not been noticed.

Still working on the assumption that the letters identified a copyist who had produced the coin, I tried to identify one who used these letters, but had no success, but then one of my colleagues, Christopher Mallan, not a numismatist but an expert in Roman history, searched in a way that had not occurred to me, and found an entry in a Sotheby's catalogue of 1850. This read:

'Catalogue of the very select collection of rare Greek & Roman coins of F. R. P. Boocke, comprising Roman large and small brass, also Greek coins in gold, silver and copper, which will be sold at auction by Messrs. S. Leigh Sotheby & Co., the 22nd of Mar. 1850 and following day.'

One of the entries was: Lot 112: <https://archive.org/details/catalogueofvalua00sot_xxxk/page/10/mode/2up>

This lot contained three coins of Nero, the first described as having the reverse type of a *decursio*. The legend is not described, so although this does not prove that the letters F R P were on the coin, they must have been, because they were the initial letters of the forenames of the coin's previous owner. I cannot explain why there was not a fourth letter, a **B**, but I am sure that there can be no other reason for these letters to have been punched into the coin.

Because of this, it seems that my first explanation for these letters was almost certainly right, although I can take little credit for this. The coin was obviously sold as a genuine one in this auction, but of course in the first half of the nineteenth century collectors and coin dealers might not have been as skilled as they are now at recognising coins that were not genuine. I tried to find someone with greater expertise than mine to look at it carefully, and decide whether it was a modern cast or not, and Tom Eden, of Morton and Eden, coin auctioneers of London, looked at photographs of it and, like Bernhard Woytek, concluded that it was probably a cast copy because of its granular surface.

With regard to the letters stamped into the coin, I had hoped that it would be possible to find out who had bought other coins from this collection, so that it might be possible to track them down and see if these had also been used on them, but no copy of this catalogue from Sotheby's 1850 auction seems to have survived. It is now available only on the Internet Archive at the address that I have provided above, and this, of course, contains no record of the persons who purchased them. Perhaps some collector or museum numismatist will read this article and be able to provide information about one or more coins bearing these letters.

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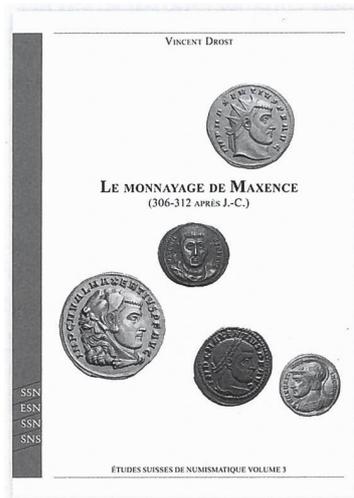
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Zum Jahr 2005 hatte der Vorstand der SNG beschlossen, die Bezugsadresse für fehlende Publikationen unserer Gesellschaft ins Ausland zu verlagern, da sich in der Schweiz kein Verlag fand, der ein Lager für die verschiedenen Produkte der SNG zu einem bestimmten Preis zur Verfügung stellte. Gleichzeitig ergab sich, dass die Versandkosten aus einem Land der Europäischen Union, verglichen mit den Porti der schweizerischen Post, bedeutend niedriger waren und es heute noch sind. Mit Paul-Francis Jacquier in Kehl am Rhein fand sich ein zuverlässiger Fachmann, der für viele Jahre die Aufgabe übernahm, fehlende Nummern der Schweizerischen Numismatischen Rundschau, der Schweizer Münzblätter und die Publikationen der Reihe Schweizer Studien zur Numismatik zu versenden. Herr Jacquier hat sich entschlossen, per Ende des Jahres 2023 diese Arbeit abzutreten. Wir bedanken uns an dieser Stelle herzlich für seinen Einsatz.

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Le Giornate numismatiche 2024 si terranno venerdì 13 e sabato 14 settembre a Bellinzona. L'invito seguirà nel numero di giugno della gazzetta numismatica svizzera.

Les Journées numismatiques 2024 auront lieu les vendredi 13 et samedi 14 septembre à Bellinzone. L'invitation suivra dans l'édition de juin de la gazette numismatique suisse.

Die Numismatischen Tage 2024 werden am Freitag, 13. und Samstag, 14. September in Bellinzona stattfinden. Die Einladung folgt in der Juni-Ausgabe der Schweizer Münzblätter.