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The Use of Propaganda on an Augustan Denarius

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ABSTRACT

Our coin is a silver denarius minted in Lugdunum (now Lyon), most likely under the reign of Augustus, the first emperor of Rome. There are factors which point to a possibility of the coin being a restitution issue minted under either Trajan or Hadrian, such as its pristine condition, which implies a lack of use, and the similarity of symbols employed on this denarius and denarii of Trajan's era. The coin is a prime example of Augustus' use of propaganda inserted into Roman daily life to sell the idea of empire to a Roman people who ardently defended a long-standing tradition of republican government. It also serves as an excellent example of the powerful ways Augustus used imagery and symbolism to convey his self-image, pedigree, and sovereignty over the Roman Empire.

Metadata: Weight: 3.67g, Diameter: 190mm, Metal: Silver(Ag), Inscriptions(OBV): "CAESAR AVGVSTVS" and "DIVI F PATER PATRIAE" Inscriptions(REV): "F COS DESIG PRINC IVVENT" and "C L CAESARES AVGVSTI"

INTRODUCTION

Through the widespread use of various forms of propaganda, Augustus sought to solidify his image. He was known by three titles: *princeps*, "first among equals", *pontifex maximus*, "high priest", and *pater patriae*, or "father of the people". While never outright stating his superiority over the populace, he promoted his various roles as first citizen, father and priest through sculpture, engravings, and other media. This coin, being such an inherently widespread medium, was likely instrumental in solidifying these images. In Augustus' time, one denarius was the daily wage of a Roman citizen.

MATERIALS & METHODS

We used the Inscriptifac Standalone Viewer to view the RTI images we captured of the coin. We photographed the coin from various angles and in numerous light settings to properly capture it from all possible perspectives. It also allowed us to get good quality close-ups of the coin. In addition, we weighed the coin and established its metadata. We also sought out academic sources in the writings of Paul Zanker, H.J Haskell, and others in order to obtain a proper picture of Augustus, the time in which he lived, and the significance of the symbolism he used as propaganda in context of the time period.

Below: Close-up view of the priestly instruments on the reverse side, the *simpuvium* and the *lituus*



Obverse Side



Reverse Side

DISCUSSION

Augustus always sought to bring himself to the level of the general populace, while still subtly stating his right to rule. The coin reverses Augustus as a holy man, with the obverse side referring to him as *DIVI F PATER PATRIAE*, which translates to "Son of God, A Father to his People" and additionally employs various pagan symbols in homage to the Roman priesthood, which Augustus presided over. The power of this title lies in the notion that essentially Rome was his child that he created then raises to maturation, even though Rome had a substantially rich history and culture before his reign. Thus, using coinage as propaganda to normalize the image of Augustus as an imperial leader played an integral role in the success of his rule being accepted. Interestingly enough, the idea of a single sovereign ruler is what the Roman people actively resented, and furthermore alluded to an eastern, foreign concept of the view of king as a "divine" ruler. The obverse side of the coin displays this allusion to divinity and/or imperial leadership (the lines between these two roles can be considered one in the same in regards to Augustus' rule due to the coin's lack of distinction of such). This side features the head of Augustus with a laurel wreath, which commemorates Augustus' great military accomplishments such as expanding the Roman Empire to one of its largest incarnations in history. The interpretation of the imaging on the reverse side of the coin is dependent on whether or not the coin is a restitution issue minted under Trajan or Hadrian. However, at this stage in the study, it is assumed that the coin is not a restitution issue due to the coin's weight. The weight of the denarius, which was the staple of Roman coinage, fluctuated greatly with the coming and going of different rulers, and our research found that the denarius of Trajan's era weighed on average .5 grams less than our subject. Also notably absent is any form of legend indicating which ruler the issue was minted under.



Above: A Comparable Trajan AR Denarius (c. 98 -117 CE)
Source: <http://tjbuggey.ancients.info/>

ANALYSIS

Assuming the coin is original, we can interpret the reverse side's symbolism as follows: Augustus' adoptive heirs apparent, Caius and Lucius Caesar, are each depicted standing togate and holding two crossed spears and shields. Their position symbolizes that they have come of age upon their completion of military service, which implies that they both had promising leadership/ military ability. Floating above them are two prominent pagan symbols: a *simpuvium* (a large spoon-like object used for sacrifices) and a *lituus*, a curved wand used in divination. These subtle symbols play an integral role in solidifying Augustus' position as *pontifex maximus*. The *lituus* represents the priestly class of augurs, while the *simpuvium* represents the *pontifices*. Augustus' dominion above these priests is implicit in the positioning of this symbolism, as the two pagan devices are placed above his two heirs apparent. The inscription on this side is an acronym, which in English stands for "Caius and Lucius Caesar, the consul of principle youth". A consul was a highly esteemed position in the Roman Empire, and was allotted considerable power even under an imperial ruler.

Pictured at the top is a silver denarius minted under Trajan, who reigned nearly a century later. It shares similar qualities with our coin, as Trajan is also depicted with a laurel crown, with the goddess of victory on the reverse side. The symbol of the laurels, as well as the inscriptions on the obverse side laud him for his various military victories. The goddess' presence on the reverse side implies these victories were sanctioned by the gods. Both coins praise the leaders' military abilities, and imply their connection with the divine.

Another detail that plays an appreciable role in determining whether or not the coin is indeed original, and thus coherent with our interpretation of the coin's symbolism and economic significance of the time period, is the amount of pure silver the coin contains. This will be determined in future study.

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