

Anita SMYK * (University of Siedlce, Poland)

Svetoslava FILIPOVA** (Regional Museum of History, Kyustendil, Bulgaria)

Coins of the ‘Syrian Empresses’ with the legend VENVS VICTRIX from lost hoard of Roman coins from Bulgaria

<https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2024.13.13>

Abstract: *Among the, now lost, hoard of Roman coins presented by Filipova, three were the coins of the female dynasts of the Severan dynasty with the VENVS VICTRIX legend on the reverse. The article examines the iconography of the coins in the light of the previous examples of the issues with the same legend. The conclusion is made that the reference to the goddess ideologically linked the dynasty with the predecessors however special reverence might also suggest an exceptional religious connection of the empresses with Venus, the deity which guaranteed in all her incarnations and aspects the permanence of the domus divina.*

Key words: Severan Dynasty, Syrian Empresses, Venus, VENVS VICTRIX, Roman Coinage, Bulgaria, Lost Hoard of Roman Coins

Introduction

In 2023, in the volume of *Proceedings in Archaeology and History of Ancient and Medieval Black Sea Region* Svetoslava Filipova presented information about the lost hoard of Roman coins probably belonged to a Bulgarian collector.¹ The hoard was identified before the Law on Cultural Heritage² came into force and there is no exact information about both its whereabouts and discovery. The information about it is based just on photo materials and there are no metrical data. According to the information, it originates from Northern Bulgaria, probably from the territory of the Roman Province Lower Moesia (*Moesia Inferior*).³

* Corresponding Author. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6006-7309>. anita.smyk@uws.edu.pl

** ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0752-7231>. filipovas@gmail.com

¹ Filipova, 2023.

² The *Cultural Heritage Act* was adopted in 2009.

³ This information by Prof. Ilya Prokopov.

Of course, we can't be certain about the preciseness and correctness of the available information regarding the real amount of the hoard. For practical reasons, the authors decided to use the term 'hoard' treating the coins in question as a complete, preserved collection, but they are aware of the imperfection of this term.

Among 112 silver coins there were supposed to be 26 issues dedicated to the women of the Severan dynasty (193-235).⁴ Below considerations regard three issues which are linked by the legend VENVS VICTRIX on the reverse.⁵ The analysis was carried out in the context of the use of the image of the Victorious Venus in the self-presentation of women from the Severan dynasty.

The lost hoard of Roman coins

The hoard consists of 112 silver coins from the period of 175-243, as 111 are denarii and one antoninianus. The oldest of the coins in the group was minted in Rome between 175-176 by Marcus Aurelius (r. 161-180).⁶ The youngest are the issues of Gordianus III (r. 238-244).⁷ The find includes coins of 11 emperors and 9 empresses [Fig. 1]. The coins were accumulated during the first representatives of the Severan dynasty (193-217) as the ones of Septimius Severus (r. 193-211) predominated (19% of the total amount of coins). The next peak was in the reign of Severus Alexander (r. 222-235) [Fig. 2]. It's quite possible the coins from the hoard to have been collected as family savings. The range between the earliest and the latest coin is 68 years and there are no chronological breaks. All of the coins were in circulation.

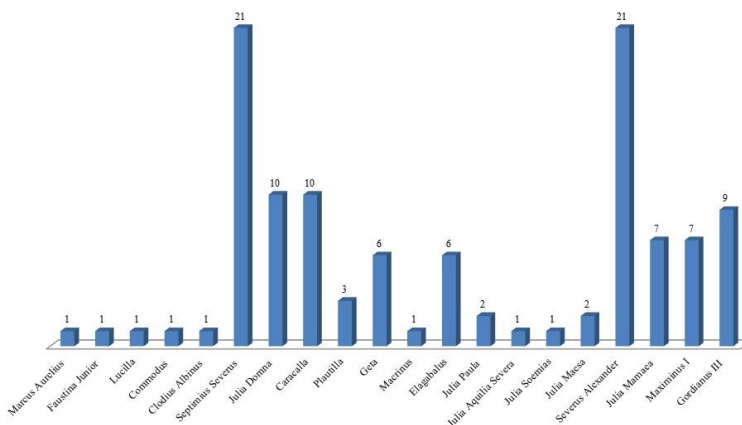


Fig. 1. Distribution of coins from the coin hoard by emperors

⁴ On the coinage of the women of the Severan dynasty see Smyk, 2021 (with further literature).

⁵ Smyk, 2024; Smyk & Maksymiuk, 2024; Smyk & Skupniewicz, 2024.

⁶ RIC III/3 *Marcus Aurelius*, no 353 [Obv. M ANTONINVS AVG GERM SARM; Rev.: TR P XXX IMP VIII COS III].

⁷ Filipova, 2023: 797-798.

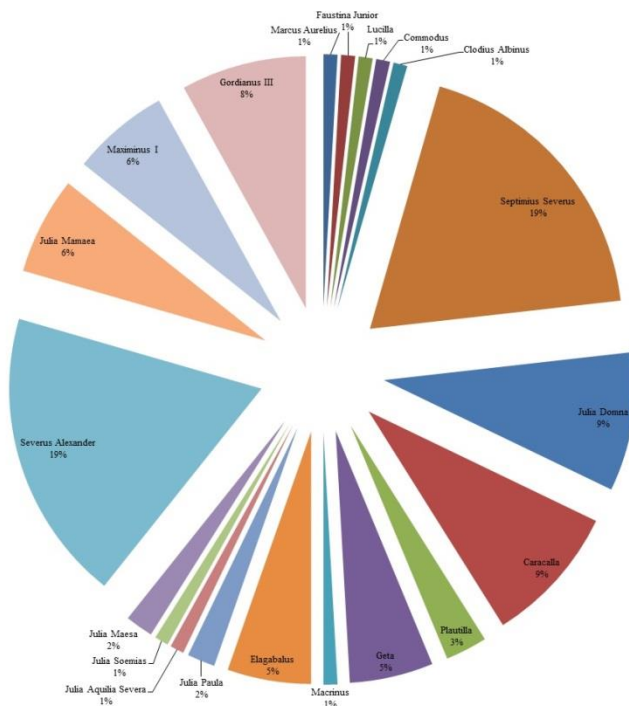


Fig. 2. Distribution of coins from the coin hoard by emperors (%)

Categorically, coins struck in the Roman mint predominate. They number 102 (91% of the total amount of coins). The rest 10 are struck in the Empire Eastern mints: Emesa – 2 pieces, Laodicea ad Mare – 4 pieces, Antioch – 4 pieces. The Emesa and Laodicea ad Mare coins were struck in the name of Septimius Severus and the Antioch ones – of Elagabalus (2 pieces) and Severus Alexander (2 pieces) [Fig. 3].

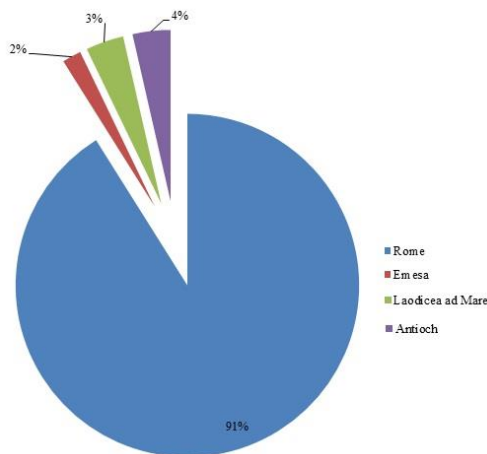


Fig. 3. Distribution of coins from the coin hoard by mints (%)

If we assume the information regarding the chronological frames of the hoard as correct, probable reason for its treasuring and staying under the ground should be sought in the events happened after 243, when the last struck coins are dated in. It means that the invasions during the time of Gordian III in 238 and 242 should not be taken as a reason for the hoard treasuring.⁸ The next events (245-247), in the Danubian provinces are associated with the invasions of the Carpi during the reign of Philip the Arab (r. 244-249).⁹ These military campaigns are mentioned by Zosimos who states that the Carpi plundered the territories on the Danube.¹⁰ According to Zonaras¹¹ and John of Antioch¹² during the western campaigns of Philip the Arab defeated the Scythians.¹³ The seriousness of this event is indicated by the fact that after driving back the invaders in 247, Philip included the title of *Carpicus Maximus*.¹⁴ Boris Gerov assumes that the areas close to the Danube were devastated during this invasion,¹⁵ and according to him the findings ending with the coins of Gordian III struck in the period 241-244 cannot be attributed to him. However, several published findings of silver coins with clear archeological context confirm the assumption that the coins were treasured because of these events namely.¹⁶

Among the known 30 hoards of silver coins ending with emissions of Gordian III, only the hoard from Veselinovo village, Shumen district is with *terminus post quem* 240 and can be connected with the invasion from 242.¹⁷ The rest are with *terminus post quem* 241-243. With the same invasion are also connected the findings ending with coins of Gordian III found in the territory of Dacia Province.¹⁸

⁸ About the invasions in 238 and 242 and the treasured findings of coins see in more details: Gerov, 1977; Touratsoglou, 2006; Calomino, 2013: 109-111; Varbanov, 2012a: 10-13.

⁹ RIC IV/3 *Philip I*, no 66 [Obv.: IMP PHILIPPVS AVG, Rev.: VICTORIA CARPICA].

¹⁰ Zosimos 1.20.1: τούτω δὲ βεβαίως ἔξεν τὴν ἀρχὴν οἰηθεὶς αὐτὸς ἐπὶ Κάρπους ἐστράτευεν ἤδη τὰ περὶ τὸν Ἰστρον λησαμένους. It seems to be about Moesia Inferior, not the Dacian provinces, see Gerov, 1977: 129; Opreanu, 1998: 89.

¹¹ Zonaras 12.19: Οὗτος δ' ὁ αὐτοκράτωρ Φίλιππος πρὸς Σκύθας ἀράμενος πόλεμον εἰς Ῥώμην ἐπανῆλθεν.

¹² John of Antioch, fr. 148, p. 597: Ὅτι Φίλιππος βασιλεύσας καὶ τοὺς Σκύθας νικήσας, ἐπὶ τὸ Βυζάντιον ἦλανεν.

¹³ See also Boteva, 2020.

¹⁴ Discussion on this title, see Suski, 2013: 144-145.

¹⁵ Gerov, 1977.

¹⁶ Ivanov & Kovacheva, 2002; Dimitrov, 2005; Slavova, 2003; Varbanov, 2012b.

¹⁷ Varbanov, 2021: 65.

¹⁸ Suciu, 2000: 134-137, 221; Găzdac, 2012: 175; see also Kolendo, 2008: 120.

Coins of the ‘Syrian Empresses’ with the legend VENVS VICTRIX from lost hoard from Bulgaria

Tab. 1. Coins of Julia Domna, Julia Maesa and Julia Mamaea with the legend VENVS VICTRIX from lost hoard from Bulgaria (the Authors based on the *RIC*)

| No | Denomination | Mint / Dates | Ruler | Obverse | Reverse | References |
|----|------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|---|---|--|
| 1 | Denarius ¹⁹ | Rome 196-211 | Septimius Severus | IVLIA AVGVSTA – Bust of Julia Domna, hair waved and coiled at back, draped, right | VENVS VICTRIX – Venus, naked to waist, standing left, holding helmet in extended right hand and palm sloped over left shoulder in left hand, resting left elbow on column; at feet, left, shield | RIC IV/1 581 ²⁰ ; BMC V 90; Conesa Navarro & Smyk, 2022: 185, fig. 3; Filipova, 2023: no 32 |
| 2 | Denarius | Rome 218-222 | Elagabalus | IVLIA MAESA AVG – Bust of Julia Maesa, hair waved and turned up low at the back, draped, right | VENVS VICTRIX – Venus, draped, standing left, holding helmet in extended right hand and transverse spear and shield | RIC IV/2 275 ²¹ ; Smyk, 2024; Filipova, 2023: no 68 |
| 3 | Denarius | Rome 225-235 | Severus Alexander | IVLIA MAMAEA AVG – Bust of Julia Mamaea, diademed, right | VENVS VICTRIX – Venus, draped, standing left, holding helmet in right hand and sceptre in left hand; at feet, left, shield | RIC IV/2 358 ²² ; BMC VI 713, 714, 715, 716, 717; Burrer & Günther, 2006: no 47; Filipova, 2023: no 94; Smyk & Maksymiuk, 2024: fig. 1, fig. 3 |

¹⁹ Under the same number the *RIC* mention also an Aureus.

²⁰ Denarius is also found in a sub-type where two children were added on the reverse.

²¹ Denarius also in a sub-type minted in Antioch, with the reverse decorated with a figure of Venus standing to the left, holding Victoriola in her right hand and sceptre in her left hand, below shield over helmet [Münzkabinett Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, inv. RÖ 57081, RÖ 16352, RÖ 57075], see Smyk, 2024.

²² Denarius also in sub-type without shield, see BM inv. 1938.0606.10. The description of the reverse on the British Museum website mentions a shield (“Venus standing left, holding helmet in extended right hand and vertical sceptre in left hand; at feet, shield”), but it is not there.

Denarius of Julia Domna



Fig. 4. RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 581, Denarius. Rome, Obv.: IVLIA AVGVSTA, Rev.: VENVS VICTRIX. After Filipova, 2023: no 32 (left). Drawing by Patryk Skupniewicz (right)

Obverse

The field is delineated by a single circle of hemispherical beads. The field is slightly off centre of the coin to the right but almost entire circle is visible, the elements within the field are well-preserved and clearly visible. Inside the circle runs the inscription divided into two parts. On the left it reads: IVLIA, on the right: AVGVSTA.

The centre of the field is occupied by the female bust in the right profile. The face is proportional to the size of the head, however the eye is disproportionately large and is shown frontally or almost frontally. The nose is very large and triangular, probably matching the scale of the eye and allowing gradual blurring of the difference in proportions. The cheeks match the fleshy lips and pronounced chin.

The coiffure of the women consists of the rows of wavy lines running in a shape of a fan from the face line to the back of the skull. At the bottom the rows bent to the right, slightly up in a horn shape. Below that hangs a oval line of hemispherical elements, which might represent braided hair or elements of jewellery. The coiffure is plaited elaborately at the back of the head. Below the neck, the folds of the robe are visible.

Reverse

The field is delineated by a single circle of hemispherical beads. The field is slightly off centre of the coin to the right, the circle is partially damaged, the elements within the field are not very clear. It justifies conclusion that the part of the matrix was worn heavier than the obverse. The inscription is fitted alongside the circle, running from 7 to 5. It reads VENVS VICTRIX.

The center of the field, within the inscription a standing figure is depicted. The figure stands on clearly marked horizontal line covering the break in inscription. The silhouette shown in slight contrapposto marked by the hips moved gently to the left and the left leg of the personage bent towards the viewer. To the right stands a column reaching the waist of the personage.

The head of the figure is shown in left profile and is disproportionately large. The facial features are blurred. The coiffure seems plaited into single braid which is raised up, at the back.

The chest of the figure is worn and flat, no folds of a robe are visible. The folded robe is seen below around the legs. The personage holds the right arm slightly extended, with the forearm shown horizontally over the waist level. Over the right hand a helmet with small comb is depicted. The wear and tear does not allow exact recognition of the type. The proportions, front moved forward and back part extended allow to identify it as one of the Hellenistic derivatives of the Boeotian type.

The left arm of the personage is sharply bent in the elbow which rests on the column. In the hand – a palm branch running diagonally up. On the ground stands a conical shield supported in the upper part by the figure's knee. The shield is depicted as a triangle filled with smaller triangular parts suggesting radiating segments. The lower border of the shield together with the palm branch accentuate diagonal dimension of the composition.

Denarius of Julia Maesa



Fig. 5. RIC IV/2 *Julia Maesa*, no 275, Denarius. Rome, Obv.: IVLIA MAESA AVG, Rev.: VENVS VICTRIX. After Filipova, 2023: no 68 (left). Drawing by Patryk Skupniewicz (right)

Obverse

The field is delineated by a single circle of hemispherical beads, broken in the lower right part and unclear at the top. This results from irregular shape of the coin itself. The inscription IVLIA MAESA AVG runs from 7-5.

The field is occupied tightly by a female bust in the right profile. The face is regular, with the straight nose, fleshy lips and somehow pronounced chin. The coiffure consists of wavy lines tied at the back of the skull. The robe covering part of the chest fills the space where the inscription breaks.

Reverse

The field is delineated by a single circle of hemispherical beads, slightly worn at the bottom part. The elements within the field are less clear than on the obverse.

Possibly the part of the matrix was worn heavier than the obverse. The inscription is fitted alongside the circle, running from 7 to 5. It reads VENVS VICTRIX. The letters are not clearly minted, first V and the X at the end are deformed.

The center of the field, within the inscription a standing figure is depicted. The figure stands in the break in inscription. The silhouette shown in slight contrapposto marked by the hips moved gently to the left and the left leg of the personage bent to the left. To the right stands a semicircular row of beads suggesting a round hoplite shield supported by the body of the personage.

The head of the figure is shown in left profile. The facial features are unclear however pronounced nose, cheeks and chin can be distinguished. The coiffure seems plaited into single braid at the back. The diadem protruding over the forehead is also visible. At the back of the head a comma-like element is visible which might mark a ribbon the diadem.

The chest of the figure is worn and flat, a single fold of the robe is visible running from the left shoulder to the right hip. The folded robe is seen below, at the belly and falling along the legs. The personage holds the right arm slightly extended, with the forearm shown horizontally over the waist level. Over the right hand a Hellenistic helmet of Boeotian type with the cheek-pieces is depicted.

The left arm of the personage is sharply bent in the elbow, in the hand she holds a long sceptre accentuating the diagonal dimension of the depiction.

Denarius of Julia Mamaea



Fig. 6. RIC IV/2 *Julia Mamaea*, no 358, Denarius. Rome, Obv.: IVLIA MAMAEA AVG, Rev.: VENVS VICTRIX. After Filipova, 2023: no 94 (left). Drawing by Patryk Skupniewicz (right)

Obverse

The field is delineated by a single circle of hemispherical beads, broken at the top and unclear at the bottom. This results from irregular shape of the coin itself. The inscription is divided to the right and left part. The left side reads: IVLIAMA, the right side: MAEAAVG.

The field is occupied tightly by a female bust in the right profile. The face is regular, with the humpbacked nose and fleshy lips. Her large eyes are looking upwards.

The coiffure consists of nest of wavy lines covering the skull. It does not cover the ear. At the back, the wavy lines are tied with an element of horizontal U, which might represent elaborate braid. A chequer incisions within it must depict a decorative net. Over the forehead, towards the top of the head protrudes a triangular diadem. The robe covering part of the chest fills the space where the inscription breaks at the bottom.

Reverse

The field is delineated by a single circle of hemispherical beads. The inscription is fitted alongside the circle, running from 7 to 5. It reads VENVS VICTRIX. There is a small gap between V and I in VICTRIX to prevent disturbing with the head of the central figure.

The center of the field, within the inscription a standing figure is depicted. The figure stands in the break in inscription. The silhouette shown in slight contrapposto marked by the hips moved gently to the left and the left leg of the personage bent to the left. To the left stands a semicircular row of beads suggesting a round hoplite shield supported by the body of the personage.

The head of the figure is shown in left profile. The facial features are unclear. She seems to be wearing a wreath.

The figure wears a cloak over robe. The upper parts of the cloak cover the shoulders, the lower edge on the left is raised up and twisted around the raised left forearm of the personage. Below that the folds fall freely along the legs. The personage holds the right arm slightly extended, with the forearm shown horizontally over the waist level. Over the right hand a helmet, of difficult to determine type, with the cheek-pieces is depicted. Her left hand rests, with an elbow pointing down, on a shaft stuck to the ground.

Discussion

Venus with a helmet, a small shield and a low column was depicted already on the coins of Octavian, where the half-naked goddess was shown backwards, and holding a transverse spear in her left hand.²³



Fig. 7. RIC I/1 *Augustus*, no 250A, Denarius. Italy, Rev.: CAESAR DIVI F. [BM inv. R.6154] © The Trustees of the British Museum

²³ RIC I *Augustus*, no 250A, 250B [Rev.: CAESAR DIVI F].

The first woman to whom coins with a representation of Venus were dedicated was the daughter of Titus (r. 79-81), Julia (*Julia Flavia*). The goddess, leaning on a low column, holding a helmet in right hand and transverse spear (sceptre?) in left hand is accompanied by the legend VENVS AVG [Fig. 8].²⁴ The reverse was repeated in the issues of Domitian (r. 81-96) minted for his wife Domitia (*Domitia Longina*).²⁵ In the issues of Sabina (*Vibia Sabina*), the wife of Hadrian (r. 117-138), a round shield was added to the iconography of Venus [Fig. 9].²⁶



Fig. 8. RIC II/1 *Julia Titi*, no 388, Denarius. Rome, Obv.: IVLIA AVGVSTA TITI AVGVSTI F, Rev.: VENVS AVGVST. [BM inv. R.10997] © The Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 9. RIC II/3 *Sabina*, no 2492, Denarius. Rome, Obv.: SABINA AVGVSTA HADRIANI AVGVSTI F, Rev.: VENVS AVGVST. [BM inv. 1857,0812.8] © The Trustees of the British Museum

A large round shield at the feet of Venus (?) was placed on the coins of Faustina the Elder (*Annia Galeria Faustina Major*), issued by Antoninus Pius (r. 138-161), however this is the only element associating this issue with the coins of Maesa and Mamaea from the Bulgarian hoard because in the right hand the goddess holds an apple and the depiction is accompanied by the legend on the reverse AVGVSTA.²⁷ Similarly, in case of the issues of Antoninus Pius of Faustina the Younger (*Annia Galeria Faustina Minor*), with the reverse legend AVGVSTI PII FIL [Fig. 10], where the common attribute of the goddess is the large shield placed on the helmet.²⁸

²⁴ RIC II/1 *Julia Titi*, no 386 [Obv.: IVLIA AVGVSTA TITI AVGVSTI F, Rev.: VENVS AVG], no 387 [Obv.: IVLIA AVGVSTA T AVGV F, Rev.: VENVS AVG], no 388 [Obv.: IVLIA AVGVSTA TITI AVGVSTI F, Rev.: VENVS AVGVST].

²⁵ RIC II/1 *Domitia*, no 847 [Obv.: DOMITIA AVGVSTA, Rev.: VENVS AVG].

²⁶ RIC II/3 *Sabina*, no 2492 [Obv.: SABINA AVGVSTA HADRIANI AVGVSTI F, Rev.: VENVS AVGVST].

²⁷ RIC II/3 *Faustina I*, no 366a-366b [Obv.: DIVA FAVSTINA, Rev.: AVGVSTA] (Aureus and Denarius).

²⁸ RIC III/3 *Faustina II*, no 495A, no 495B [Obv.: FAVSTINA AVGVSTA, Rev.: AVGVSTI PII FIL]; also Senate issues with abbreviation SC, see RIC III/3 *Faustina II*, no 1389A, no 1389B.



Fig. 10. RIC III/3 *Faustina II*, no 495A, Denarius. Rome, Obv.: FAVSTINA AVGVSTA, Rev.: AVGVSTI PII FIL. [BM inv. 1860,0330.160] © The Trustees of the British Museum

The legend of the reverse VENVS VICTRIX first appeared on issues minted by Marcus Aurelius (r. 161-180) of Faustina the Younger²⁹ and of Lucilla (*Lucilla*).³⁰ The issues of Crispina (*Bruttia Crispina*)³¹ with the legend VENVS VICTRIX depict the goddess exclusively from behind, identically as on some issues of Faustina the Younger [Fig. 11].³²



Fig. 11. RIC III/3 *Crispina*, no 290. Aureus, Rome. Obv: CRISPINA AVGVSTA, Rev.: VENVS VICTRIX [BM inv. 1856,1101.116] © The Trustees of the British Museum

What the reverses of all three coins in question have in common, in addition to the legend inscribed in Nominative (VENVS VICTRIX), is the way the goddess is depicted, standing frontally with her head facing left. The Hellenistic helmet of Boeotian type is also an identical attribute (despite the poor visibility, it can be assumed that the same type of helmet is also present on the reverse of the coin of Julia Mamaea). The attribute of Venus that connects these issues is also the shield placed at the feet of the goddess, but in the case of the issue of Domna it is a small oval shield as on the coins of Venus minted by Octavian [Fig. 7]. However, on the reverse of the coins of Maesa and Mamaea is the large oval shield seen on the Antonine issues [Fig. 10].³³

²⁹ RIC III/3 *Faustina II*, no 736 [Obv.: FAVSTINA AVGVSTA, Rev.: VENVS VICTRIX] standing to the left, holding Victoria in an extended hand while left hand is resting on a shield placed on a helmet. See also Senate issues, (no 1681-1682, no 1688) with the identical iconography but a legend in Dativ (VENERI VICTRICI S C); See also: RIC III/3 *Faustina II*, no 723 [Obv.: FAVSTINA AVGVSTA, Rev.: VENERI VICTRICI], where Venus is shown identically as on the coins of the women from the Flavian Dynasty but without a shield and column; Exceptional iconography of the reverse depicts Senate emission RIC III/3 *Faustina II*, no 1680 [Obv.: FAVSTINA AVGVSTA, Rev.: VENERI VICTRICI S C], where semi-nude Venus stands holding the right arm of Mars.

³⁰ RIC III/3 *Lucilla*, no 787 (Obv.: LVCILLA AVGVSTA, Rev.: VENVS VICTRIX); also in a sub-type without the shield, see RIC III/3 *Lucilla*, no 786 (Obv.: LVCILLA AVGVSTA, Rev.: VENVS VICTRIX).

³¹ RIC III/3 *Crispina*, nr 290 (Aw.: CRISPINA AVGVSTA, Rev.: VENVS VICTRIX).

³² Patrz także: RIC III/3 *Faustina II*, nr 723

³³ Also in the issues of Titus, see RIC II/1 *Titus*, no 13 [Obv.: IMP TITVS CAES VESPASIAN AVGVSTVS P M, Rev.: TR P VIII IMP XIII COS VII], with Venus standing to the right, leaning on the column, holding a helmet and a spear while an oval shield is supported on the column.

There are significant differences in remaining attributes of Venus. On the denarius of Julia Domna, the goddess is shown holding a palm branch sloped to the left in her left hand while her left elbow is resting on a column. While the low column in the iconography of Venus reproduces depictions from Octavian issues, a palm branch combined with this goddess is a novel element. Venus holding a palm branch was placed on the reverse of Julia Domna coins in issues minted by Septimius Severus during the power struggle (193-196).³⁴ The legend of the reverse *VENERI VICTR* is accompanied by a depiction of a half-naked goddess standing with her back, holding an apple in her right hand and a palm branch in her left.³⁵

Extremely interesting is the issue of Julia Domna, which the *RIC* and the *BMC* doesn't record. The reverse of the coin depicts Venus standing left resting left elbow on column, holds helmet and palm exactly as on the discussed coin from Bulgaria [Fig. 1], however, a Cupid was added to the left of the shield, and to the right of column a cuirass was placed [Fig. 12].³⁶

It should also be emphasized at this point the emissions of Plautilla (*Fulvia Plautilla*), which show Venus standing frontally, holding an apple in her right stretched hand and a palm branch in her left, resting on a shield. Cupid is pictured in front of the goddess [Fig. 13].³⁷



Fig. 12. Denarius, Rome. Obv.: *IVLIA AVGVSTA*. Rev.: *VENVS VICTRIX* [Münzkabinett der Universität Göttingen, inv. AS-02510. Stephan Eckardt, Archäologisches Institut Göttingen, 2014. https://www.kenom.de/objekt/record_DE-MUS-062622_kenom_156942/1/]

³⁴ Janiszewska, 2010: 20-88.

³⁵ *RIC IV/I Julia Domna*, no 536 [Obv.: *IVLIA DOMNA AVG*, Rev.: *VENERI VICTR*]; see also *RIC IV/I Julia Domna*, no 842, no 846 [Obv.: *IVLIA DOMNA AVG*, Rev.: *VENERI VICTR S C*]; In some of the instances of provincial coins the symbol of palm is replaced with the sceptre, see discussion in Conesa Navarro & Smyk, 2022: 181-182.

³⁶ On the website of Coin cabinet of Goettingen University, the reverse of the presented coin does not depict two children, as the description errorously suggest: "Halbnackte Venus stehend, nach links gewandt, in rechter Hand Helm, in linker Hand Palmzweig, linker Arm auf Säule gestützt, zu ihren füßen Schild, zu beiden Seiten je ein Kind; Perlkreis". Identified as a child is certainly Cupid, while on the right at the feet of the goddess is placed not a child but certainly a military cuirass.

³⁷ *RIC IV/1 Plautilla*, no 369 [Obv.: *PLAVTILLA AVGVSTA*, Rev.: *VENVS VICTRIX*], no 579, no 582 [Obv.: *PLAVTILLA AVGVSTA*, Rev.: *VENVS VICTRIX S C*].



Fig. 13. RIC IV/1 *Plautilla*, no 369. Denarius, Rome. Obv: PLAVTILLA AVGVSTA. Rev.: VENVS VICTRIX [Mainz, Historisches Seminar, Arbeitsbereich Alte Geschichte, der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität, ID488. Photographs by Lucas Hafner. <https://numid.uni-mainz.de/object?id=ID488>]

The seizure of power by the Sever dynasty forced specific political measures to justify ideologically their rights to exercise imperial power.³⁸ The minting of the coins of Julia Domna with the legend VENVS VICTRIX not only legitimized their power by referring to the Julio-Claudian dynasty, but showed its continuity through links to the Antonine dynasty.³⁹ The addition of Cupid in the iconography of Victorious Venus in the issues of Julia Domna and Plautilla emphasizes the maternal aspect of the goddess, somehow blurring her original military role. Venus *Victrix* here becomes the ‘protector’ of the foretold new dynasty.

It should be noted that Caracalla (r. 211-217) was the first emperor on whose coins Venus was depicted with the epithet *Victrix*. In the issues of the emperor, the standing goddess holds a statue of Victoria in her right hand, and in her left hand, resting on a shield placed on a helmet, she holds a spear.⁴⁰ In the second type, Venus holds a helmet in her right hand, and in her left hand instead of a spear is a sceptre, and figures of two seated captives have been added [Fig. 14].⁴¹

On the reverses of the coins of Julia Maesa and Julia Mamaea, Venus holds a long sceptre (?) or spear (?). It must be emphasised that iconography of these coins relates to the issues of Caracalla, with the legend VENVS VICTRIX on reverse, where Venus is shown holding a helmet and a sceptre/spear, while leaning on large, oval shield. The only difference are two prisoners placed at the feet of the goddess on the issues of the emperor [Fig. 14].

³⁸ On the self-adoption into the gens Aureli, see for example: CIL XIV Suppl., 4381: IMP(eratori) CAESARI L. SEPTIMIO SEVERO PIO PERTINACI AVG(usto) ARABICO ADIABENICO PARTHICO MAXIMO FELICI PONTIFICI MAX(imo) TRIB(unicia) POT(estate) XV IMP(eratori) XII CO(n)S(uli) III P(atrici) P(atriciae) DIVI MARCI ANTONINI PII GERMANICI SARMAT(ici) FIL(io) DIVI COMMODI FRATRI DIVI ANTONINI PII NEPOTI DIVI HADRIANI PRONEPOTI DIVI TRAIANI PARTHICI ABNEPOTI DIVI NERVAE ADNEPOTI; see also RIC IV/1 *Septimius Severus*, no 65 [Obv.: L SEPT SEV PERT AVG IMP VII.; Rev.: DIVI M PII F P M TR P III COS II P P], see Baharal, 1989; Smyk, 2021: 66-67.

³⁹ Maksymiuk, 1999; Rowan, 2011: 253; Langford, 2013: 16; Okoń, 2018; Conesa Navarro, 2019.

⁴⁰ RIC IV/1 *Caracalla*, no 310A, no 310B, no 311A, no 311B, 311C, no 311D, no 574, no 575A, no 577A, no 577B.

⁴¹ RIC IV/1 *Caracalla*, no 312A, no 312B, no 312C, no 312D [Obv.: ANTONINVS PIVS AVG GERM, Rev.: VENVS VICTRIX].



Fig. 14. RIC IV/1 *Caracalla*, no 312D. Denarius, Rome. Obv: ANTONINVS PIVS AVG GERM, Rev.: VENVS VICTRIX [BM inv. 1992,0509.143] © The Trustees of the British Museum

The restoration of the dynasty, which was accomplished by the introduction of Heliogabalus (r. 218-222) and then Severus Alexander (r. 222-235) to the throne, from an ideological point of view, was not a straightforward procedure, since the connection to Severus of the two grandsons of Julia Maesa took place only in the female line (*via cognatio*).⁴² According to the written sources the gossips were intentionally spread saying that both Heliogabalus and Alexander Severus were the extramarital sons of Caracalla.⁴³

It is in this context the issues of Julia Maesa and Julia Mamaea with the legend VENVS VICTRIX should be considered. They are iconographically not the same with the issues of Julia Domna, but through the almost identical attribution of the goddess connect with the issues of Caracalla, the fictional ‘father’, of the two young emperors.

Conclusions

It should be emphasized that although Julia Domna modeled herself on Faustina the Younger, both in terms of titles adopted and coin issues, she introduced a new and original perception of Venus by adding a palm branch in the attribution of the goddess, by which Domna’s Venus, so to speak, appropriated the attributes of Victoria.

It also seems that while the early issues of Julia Domna can be linked not only to a dynastic aspect, but to a military one, the Venus on the coins of Maesa and Mamaea had a different, much broader meaning. The only campaign in which Maesa participated was the military action in Syria, which resulted in the defeat of Macrinus (217-218), but coins with the legend VENVS VICTRIX were also struck for her. This fact suggests that the issues of Julia Maesa and Julia Mamaea (despite the participation

⁴² AE, 1912, 155. Discussion in Kettenhofen, 1979: 158.

⁴³ Hdn. 5.3.10: ἦσαν δὲ τινες ἐξ αὐτῶν καὶ πρόσφυγες οἰκεῖοι τε τῆς Μαΐσης, πρὸς οὓς ἐκείνη θαυμάζοντας τὸν παῖδα, εἴτε πλασαμένη εἴτε καὶ ἀληθεύουσα, ἐξεῖπεν ὅτι ἄρα Ἀντωνίνου υἱὸς ἐστὶ φύσει, τῇ δὲ ὑπολήψει ἄλλου δοκοῖη· ἐπιφοιτῆσαι γὰρ αὐτὸν ταῖς θυγατράσιν αὐτῆς νέαις τε οὖσαις καὶ ὠραιαῖς, καθ’ ὃν καιρὸν ἐν τοῖς βασιλείοις σὺν τῇ ἀδελφῇ διέτριβεν. ὅπερ ἐκείνοι ἀκούσαντες, τοῖς συστρατιώταις κατ’ ὀλίγον ἀπαγγέλλοντες διαβόητον ἐποίησαν τὴν φήμην, ὡς ἐς πᾶν χωρῆσαι τὸ στρατιωτικόν; Cass. Dio 79.32.2: ἐλπίσας ἐκόντας τοὺς ἔνδον παραστήσεσθαι. ὡς δ’ οὔτε τις αὐτῶ ἐπεκηρυκεύετο, καὶ προσέτι τὰς πύλας πάσας τῆς νυκτὸς ἀπωκοδόμησαν ὥστε ἐν ἀσφαλεστέρω εἶναι, προσέβαλεν μὲν αὐθις αὐτοῖς, ἐπέρανε δ’ οὐδέν. τὸν τε γὰρ Λουῖτον, ὃν Μάρκον Αὐρήλιον Ἀντωνῖνον ἤδη προσηγόρευον, περιφέροντες ὑπὲρ τοῦ τείχους, καὶ εἰκόνας τινὰς τοῦ Καρακάλλου παιδικὰς ὡς καὶ; There is no doubt that the genealogy cited by *Historia Augusta* (*Carac.* 9.2: *filium reliquit, qui postea et ipse Macedonum Antoninus Heliogabalus dictus est*) is false, see Rowan 2012, 164-165.

of the empress in the military campaigns of her son) should be considered in a different context. First of all, as a goddess granting legitimacy to the power of the Severans by emphasizing her maternal aspects.⁴⁴

Venus, along with Juno, are the two most frequently depicted goddesses on the coins, not only in the case of the wife of Septimius Severus, but also in the case of most of the imperial women representing the Severan house.⁴⁵

It seems that one can cautiously hypothesize, about the special worship of Venus among the ‘Syrian Empresses’, a goddess who may have been the ‘dynastic deity’ of the women in the Severian dynasty. The reference to the goddess ideologically linked the dynasty with the predecessors however special reverence might also suggest an exceptional religious connection of the empresses with the deity which originally might syncretise the aspects of the goddess worshipped by the Severan women, coming from Syria, with ‘Imperial Venus’.⁴⁶ A goddess who guaranteed in all her incarnations and aspects the permanence of the *domus divina*.

⁴⁴ Okoń, 2012: 15: “Godne uwagi jest systematyczne podkreślanie macierzyńskich ról kolejnych cesarzowych, co korespondowało z faktem, że ich pozycja i władza nie wynikały z uprawnień instytucjonalnych, lecz ze związków rodzinnych. Cesarz ojciec i cesarzowa matka stają się dla ludności imperium wzorem idealnego małżeństwa, a zarazem odwzorowaniem boskiego związku Jowisza i Junony, naczelných bóstw rzymskiego panteonu”; see also Domínguez Arranz, 2017: 100; Bertolazzi, 2019.

⁴⁵ Günter, 2017: 138.

⁴⁶ Smyk & Skupniewicz, 2024.

Bibliography

Sources

- Cassii Dionis Cocceiani Historiarum romanarum quae supersunt. Volume IX: Books 71-80.* Edited by E. Cary, H. Foster. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1927.
- Herodian. *History of the Empire from the Time of Marcus Aurelius.* Edited by C.R. Whittaker. London & Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969-1970.
- Ioannis Zonarae Epitome Historiarum. vols. 3. L.* Edited by Dindorf. Leipzig:Teubner, 1870.
- John of Antioch. In *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum. vol. 4.* Edited by C. Müller. Paris: A. Firmin Didot, 1868.
- Mattingly, H. (1975). *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum. Pertinax to Elagabalus, vol. V.* London: British Museum.
- Scriptores historiae Augustae. vols. 2.* Edited by Ch. Samberger, W. Seyfarth, E. Hohl. Leipzig:Teubner, 1997.
- The Roman Imperial Coinage, vol. 1: Augustus–Vitellius (31 BC–69 AD).* Edited by H. Mattingly, E.A. Sydenham, London, 1923; *vol. 2: Vespasian–Hadrian (69-138), vol. 3: Antoninus Pius–Commodus (138-192), vol. 4a: Pertinax–Geta VII and Caracalla (193-217), vol. 4b: Macrinus–Pupienus (217-238).* Edited by H. Mattingly, E.A. Sydenham, London: Spink, 1926-1936.
- Zosimi comitis et exadvocati fisci Historia nova.* Edited by L. Mendelssohn. Lipsiae: Teubner, 1887.

Literature

- Baharal, D. (1989). Portraits of the Emperor L. Septimius Severus (193-211 A.D.) as an Expression of his Propaganda. *Latomus*, 48(3), 566–580. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41541190>
- Bertolazzi, R. (2019). Julia Domna and her Divine Motherhood: A Re-examination of the Evidence from Imperial Coins. *The Classical Journal*, 114(4), 464–486. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tcj.2018.0015>
- Boteva, D. (2020). Some Considerations Related to the Scythica Vindobonensia. In F. Mitthof, G. Martin, J. Gruskova (Eds.), *Empire in Crisis: Gothic Invasions and Roman Historiography. Beiträge einer internationalen Tagung zu den Wiener Dexipp-Fragmenten (Dexippus Vindobonensis), Wien, 3.–6. Mai 2017* (pp. 195–212). Wien: Holzhausen Verlag.
- Burrer, F., Günther, R. (2006). *Vergöttlicht oder verdammt? Römische Kaiserfrauen im Spiegel der Münzen. Die Sammlung antiker Münzen der Universität Mannheim (Sammlung Höhn).* Mannheim: Mannheim University Press.
- Calomino, D. (2013). Die-sharing in Moesia Inferior under Gordian III. *The Numismatic Chronicle*, 173, 105–126. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43859730>
- Conesa Navarro, P.D. (2019). Faustina la Menor y Julia Domna como matres castrorum. Dos mujeres al servicio de la propaganda imperial de las dinastías Antonina y Severa. *Lucentum*, 38: 281–299. <https://doi.org/10.14198/LVCENTVM2019.38.13>
- Conesa Navarro, P.D., Smyk, A. (2022). Goddess Venus on Julia Domna's coins. The Political Use of the Coinage of an Augusta of the Severan Dynasty. *Historia i Świat*, 11, 175–200. <https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2022.11.11>
- Dimitrov, K. (2005). Novae and the Barbaric Incursions in 238-251. *Orpheus. Journal of Indo-European and Thracian Studies*, 15, 79–98.
- Dominguez Arranz, A. (2017). Imágenes del poder en la Roma imperial: política, género y propaganda. *Arenal. Revista De Historia De Las Mujeres*, 24(1): 99–131. <https://doi.org/10.30827/arenal.v24i1.5603>

- Filipova, S. (2023). Lost hoard of Roman coins presumably found in Northern Bulgaria. *Proceedings in Archaeology and History of Ancient and Medieval Black Sea Region*, 15, 787–805. <https://doi.org/10.53737/8461.2023.58.17.032>
- Gäzdac, C. (2012). ‘War and peace’! Patterns of violence through coin hoards distribution. The Middle and Lower Danube from Trajan to Aurelianus. *Istros*, 18, 165–198.
- Gerov, B. (1977). Die Einfälle der Nordvölker in den Ostbalkanraum in Lichte der Münzschatzfunde I. Das II. und III. Jahrhundert (101-284). In H. Temporini (Ed.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt. Band 6 Politische Geschichte: Provinzen und Randvölker: Lateinischer Donau-Balkanraum* (pp. 110–181). Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110852882-005>
- Günther, E. (2017). Femaleness Matters: Identity and Identification Processes in the Severan Dynasty. *Marburger Beiträge zur antiken Handels-Wirtschafts-und Sozialgeschichte*, 34, 113–168.
- Ivanov, R., Kovacheva, T. (2002). Ulpiya Eskus. In R. Ivanov (Ed.), *Rimski i rannovizantiyski gradove v Balgariya [Roman and Early Byzantine cities in Bulgaria]* (pp. 31–58). Sofia: Balgarska akademiya na naukite. (in Bulgarian)
- Janiszewska, D. (2010). *Wojna domowa w Rzymie w latach 193-197*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie.
- Kettenhofen, E. (1979). *Die syrischen Augustae in der historischen Überlieferung: Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Orientalisierung*. Bonn: Habelt.
- Kolendo, J. (2008). Novae during the Goth raid of AD 250/1 (Iordanes, *Getica*, 101-103). In T. Derda, P. Dyczek, J. Kolendo (Eds.), *Novae: Legionary Fortress and Late Antique Town, vol. 1, A Companion to the Study of Novae: History of Research, Novae in Ancient Sources, Historical Studies, Geography, Topography, and Cartography, Bibliography 1726-2008* (pp. 117–131). Warsaw: Center for Research on the Antiquity of Southeastern Europe. University of Warsaw.
- Langford, J. (2013). *Maternal Megalomania. Julia Domna and the Imperial Politics of Motherhood*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press
- Maksymiuk, K. (1999). Założenia polityki propagandowej Septymiusza Sewera na przykładzie tytułu Julii Domny – mater castrorum. *Meander*, 5: 449–455.
- Okoń, D. (2012). Iulia Augusta mater w świetle źródeł epigraficznych. *Przegląd Zachodniopomorski*, 27(2): 7–16.
- Okoń, D. (2018). Several Remarks on the Cult and the Titulature of Empresses from the Severan Dynasty. *Mnemon*, 18.(2), 142–149.
- Opreanu, C.H. (1998). *Dacia Romana si barbaricum*. Timisoara: Mirton. (in Romanian)
- Rowan, C. (2011). The public image of the Severan women. *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 79, 241–273. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41725307>
- Rowan, C. (2012). *Under Divine Auspices: Divine Ideology and the Visualisation of Imperial Power in the Severan Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Slavova, M. (2003). Sakrovishte ot rimski imperatorski moneti ot s. Mineralni bani, Haskovska oblast [A treasure trove of Roman imperial coins from the village of Mineralni Bani, Haskovo region]. *Numizmatika i epigrafika*, 1, 69–81. (in Bulgarian)
- Smyk, A. (2021). *Boginie powiązane z kobietami Sewerów w polityce propagandowej dynastii (studium numizmatyczne)*. Siedlce: University of Siedlce.
- Smyk, A. (2024). Denar Julii Mezy z legendą VENVS VICTRIX ze zbiorów Muzeum Historii Sztuki w Wiedniu. *Wieki Stare i Nowe*, 19. (in press)
- Smyk, A., Maksymiuk, K. (2024). VENVS VICTRIX na monetach Julii Mamei – kilka uwag o kreowaniu pamięci historycznej przez ostatnich Sewerów. *In Gremium. Studies in History, Culture and Politics*, (in press)
- Smyk, A., Skupniewicz, P. (2024). A denarius of Julia Maesa with reverse legend VENVS VICTRIX from the collection of the British Museum. *Historia i Świat*, 13, 231–254. <https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2024.13.14>

Suciu, V. (2000). *Tezaure monetare din Dacia Romana si postromana*. Cluj–Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană. (in Romanian)

Suski, R. (2013). The Titles Dacicus Maximus and Carpicus Maximus in the Imperial Propaganda of the Third and the First Half of the Fourth Century. *Eos*, 100, 139–159.

Touratsoglou, I. (2006). *Greece and the Balkans before the end of Antiquity*. Athens: Hellenic Numismatic Society.

Varbanov, V. (2012a). Barbarian Invasions in the Roman Provinces of Lower Moesia and Thrace in the mid- Third Century and the Coin Hoards from that Period. In L. Vagalinski, N. Sharankov, S. Torbatov (Eds.), *The Lower Danube Roman Limes (1st-6th c. AD)* (pp. 289–309). Sofia: National Archaeological Institute with Museum.

Varbanov, V. (2012b). Nahodka ot denari i antoniniani ot s. Koprivets, Rusensko [Find of Denarii and Antoninian from the Koprivets village, Rusensko]. In M. Manov (Ed.), *Vasilka Gerasimova-Tomova. In Memoriam* (pp. 335–351). Sofia: Balgarska akademiya na naukite. (in Bulgarian)

Varbanov, V. (2021). Roman coin hoards from Moesia Inferior and Thrace (from Hadrian to Diocletian). Current stage of research. In V. Varbanov, N. Rusev (Eds.), *Coin hoards in Southeastern Europe (1st-6th century AD). Materials from the International Numismatic Symposium “Coin hoards in Southeastern Europe (1st-6th century AD), held in Rousse, Bulgaria, June 20-23, 2019* (pp. 59–94). Ruse: TS Group Ltd.

To cite this article: Smyk, A., Filipova, S. (2024). Coins of the ‘Syrian Empresses’ with the legend VENVS VICTRIX from lost hoard of Roman coins from Bulgaria. *Historia i Świat*, 13, 213–230. <https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2024.13.13>



© 2024 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-ND) 4.0 license.