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A denarius of Julia Maesa with reverse legend VENVS VICTRIX from the collection of the British Museum

<https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2024.13.14>

Abstract: *The article discusses unique iconography of the denarius of Julia Maesa from the British Museum [inv. 1992,0509.184]. The inscription of the reverse states Venus Victrix however the set of attributes does not match the conventional images of the goddess. This iconographic bricolage of various goddesses can be interpreted in terms of dynastic cult of the empresses of the Severan dynasty but also, as message addressed to Syrian army and population at the time of war against Macrinus. Such possibility would allow to date the coin to the first half of 218.*

Key words: Ancient Rome, Severan Dynasty, Julia Maesa, VENVS VICTRIX, Roman Coinage, British Museum

Introduction

In the collection of the Department of Money and Medals of the British Museum is a unique copy of a denarius of Julia Maesa with a legend on the reverse VENVS VICTRIX [Fig. 1].¹ It should be emphasized that although Venus appeared with a variety of epithets,² on the coins of Julia Maesa the goddess is associated exclusively

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¹ BM inv. 1992,0509.184. This coin was purchased from C.L. Clay in 1992.

² GENETRIX (RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 537, no 578, no 387-389, no 591-592, no 604-605; RIC IV/2 *Julia Paula*, no 222-223; RIC IV/2 *Orbiana*, no 326-327; RIC IV/2 *Julia Mamaea*, no 354-356, 704); VICTRIX (RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 535-536, no 579, no 581, no 630-633, no 645, no 647, no 842, no 846, no 888-890; RIC IV/1 *Plautilla*, no 369, no 579, no 582; RIC IV/2 *Julia Mamaea*, no 357-358, no 705-707); FELIX (RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 580, no 646, no 866, no 877; RIC IV/1 *Plautilla*, no 368; RIC IV/2 *Aquilia Severa*, no 398; RIC IV/2 *Julia Mamaea*, no 350-353, no 694-703); CAELESTIS (RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 604-605; RIC IV/2 *Julia Soaemias*, no 240-245, no 402-408; RIC IV/2 *Aquilia Severa*, no 230); Smyk, 2021: 41-48, 63-74; Conesa Navarro & Smyk, 2022; On the coins emissions of the women of the Severan dynasty (193-235), see, example: Lusnia, 1995; Brenot, 2000; Kosmetatou, 2002; Balbuza, 2015; Royo Martínez, 2017; Bertolazzi, 2019; Conesa Navarro, 2023; On so-called “Syrian empresses”, see: Kettenhofen, 1979; Rowan, 2011; Nadolny, 2016; Günther, 2017; Okoń, 2018.

with the epithet *Victrix*. Moreover, the publishers of the *RIC* (*Roman Imperial Coinage*) record only one issue of Julia Maesa with such a legend on the reverse.³ The coin is also interesting, because while the goddess Venus with the epithet *Victrix* is depicted on numerous issues of women of the Severan dynasty,⁴ in this case we find an unusual iconography of the reverse. This coin presented was not recorded by either the publishers of the *RIC* or the *BMC* (*Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*). According to the description on the British Museum website, it was struck at an unidentified eastern mint.⁵

Description

Museum number: 1992,0509.184

Denomination: denarius

Die-axis: 6 o'clock

Weight: 2.780 grammes

Material: Silver

Obverse: IVLIA MAESA AVG

Reverse: VENVS VICTRIX



Fig. 1. Denarius, Minted in Eastern Roman Empire. Obv.: IVLIA MAESA AVG, Rev.: VENVS VICTRIX [BM inv. 1992,0509.184] © The Trustees of the British Museum (left). Drawing by Patryk Skupniewicz (right).

³ RIC IV/2 *Julia Maesa*, no 275 [Obv.: IVLIA MAESA AVG, Rev.: VENVS VICTRIX], minted in Rome with the reverse including the figure of Venus, draped, standing left, holding helmet in extended right hand and transverse spear and shield (Smyk & Filipova, 2024: 219-220, fig. 5); also in the type minted in Antiochia, where the goddess holds in the extended hand a small statue of Victory, in left transverse sceptre, while the helmet was placed under the shield (Smyk, 2024, with further literature, photo see Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, inv. RÖ 57075, RÖ 16352, RÖ 57081).

⁴ RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 535-536, no 579, no 581, no 630-633, no 645, no 647, no 842, no 846, no 888-890; RIC IV/1 *Plautilla*, no 369, no 579, no 582; RIC IV/2 *Julia Mamaea*, no 357-358, no 705-707.

⁵ Discussion on the eastern mints of the Severans, see: Butcher, 1988; Duncan-Jones, 2001; Howgego, 2002; Gitler & Ponting, 2007; Dandrow, 2016.

Obverse

The coin is not regular disc. It is slightly flattened with one of the sides slightly narrower, close to egg-shape. The pictorial field is defined by an inscription which runs around a female bust placed in the center and defines a circle which intentionally was to match the coin. The part running to the left of the head reads IVLIA, the remaining part of inscription runs to the right of the bust leaving the top and bottom parts not inscribed. The right inscription reads MAESA AVG.

The central, female bust is shown in the right profile. A round head placed on slender neck. Below, the folds of the clothing are visible with a collar of fine textile running around the neck and external robe of thicker material folded in a hook shape over the collar bone and upper chest. Approximately two thirds of the head at the left and upper side are covered by coiffure depicted in the form of the wavy lines which run diagonally over the face from right, down to the left, but become gradually horizontal towards left. The lines turn sharply at the height of the temple suggesting hair stylisation at the sides of the head, covering ears. At the back of the head there is a line in the shape of a slice of a circle followed by two vertical lines suggesting form of hairdo or hair band. The semicircular line is linked with the side coiffure which suggests an elaborate part of hairdo at the back of the head.

The face takes up about a third of the surface of the head. The cheeks are puffy and double chin is slightly marked. The nose is slightly prominent with a small hump. The lower lip is fleshy but the upper one rather straight. The eye is in-proportionally large with pronounced lower lid which results in somehow blacked out appearance.

Reverse

The circular pictorial field is located slightly off centre of the coin and is defined by an inscription. The inscription is divided into two parts. The left one reads: VENVS, the right one reads: VICTRIX. The gaps between text are occupied by the fragments of the central image.

The centre of the field is occupied by a depiction of a standing female figure. The body of the personage is located on the right side, with the left contour coinciding with the vertical axis of the pictorial field. The left side is divided vertically by the staff held by the figure in her bent right arm. The staff terminates with a ball at the bottom.

The figure is disproportionate. The head is too large, the arms from shoulder to elbow are too long in relation to forearms. The female was shown in slight but stiff contraposto to the right, with torso positioned vertically. She wears a long folded robe which covers details of the legs however slightly diagonal position of the right leg and vertical position of the left one is well marked. The hips are fully covered by the folds of the cloth. The chest is worn however an element in the shape of rounded triangle

covers its centre. Four protrusions come diagonally from the central element – two on the shoulders, two towards the hips. The right arm is directed left, sharply bent up in the elbow with hand firmly grasping the shaft dividing vertically the left side. The left arm falls loosely down and is slightly bent to the right, under the folds of the robe. The right shoulder of the figure is lower, on the central vertical axis, is lower than her left shoulder on the right side.

The head is damaged and no facial details can be observed except for pronounced cheek bones and chin. The head is divided by a wavy line running from the forehead to the back of the head, suggesting a helmet. Over the top of the head four triangular elements protrude upwards.

To the left of the figure, at the height between the shoulders and hips, a worn cornucopia was placed held by the hand of the figure almost vertically, slightly bent to the right. A trapezoid elect hangs down from it marking the edge of the robe.

Iconography of Venus on the coins with the legend VENVS VICTRIX

The first woman of the imperial family to have the coins minted with the VICTRIX reverse legend on the reverse was Faustina the Younger (*Annia Galeria Faustina Minor*). The goddess is shown standing, holding Victoria in her right outstretched hand, her left hand resting on a shield (on which she-wolf and twin or the Dioscuri are shown) placed on her helmet [Fig. 2].⁶ There is a unique representation showing a half-naked Venus standing with an armed Mars.⁷ The third type of representing Venus⁸ was already present on coins minted by Vespasian (r. 69-79).⁹ There the half-naked goddess, is shown with her back to the viewer, holding a spear in her left hand, supported by a low column, and a helmet in her outstretched right hand. Issues of Crispina (*Bruttia Crispina*) with the legend VENVS VICTRIX depict Venus as on the third type of coins of Faustina the Younger, where the difference is that a sceptre is shown instead of a spear in the left hand of the goddess, and a shield is added at her feet [Fig. 3].¹⁰

⁶ RIC III/3 *Faustina II*, no 736, no 1688, no 1681-1682; Identical iconography was employed in the issues of Lucilla (*Lucilla*) in the variety which includes (RIC III/3 *Lucilla*, no 787) and excludes (RIC III/3 *Lucilla*, no 786) the helmet.

⁷ RIC III/3 *Faustina II*, no 1680.

⁸ RIC III/3 *Faustina II*, no 723.

⁹ RIC II/1 *Titus*, no 1077, no 1078.

¹⁰ RIC III/3 *Crispina*, no 290.



Fig. 2. RIC III/3 *Faustina II*, no 736. Aureus, Rome. Obv: FAVSTINA AVGVSTA, Rev.: VENVS VICTRIX [BM inv. 1867,0101.729] © The Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 3. 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

The Julia Domna issues introduced an elaborate articulation of *Venus Victrix*. The goddess is depicted with an apple in her hand instead of a helmet, an attribute that until then had no military connotations,¹¹ moreover, the spear was replaced by a palm branch [Fig. 4],¹² an attribute of the goddess *Victoria*.¹³ In issues minted in Rome, the third type of Faustina the Younger was multiplied in the representation of Venus, where the goddess is shown from behind. A second type of the reverse of the Julia Domna coins was also minted, which has no references to earlier issues. Venus naked to waist stands forward leaning with bent elbow against a low column holding a palm branch. It should be noted that a new attribution of *Venus Victrix* (apple),¹⁴ was introduced in part of the issue, but coins with the typical military attribution (helmet, shield, cuirass) [Fig. 5].¹⁵



Fig. 4. RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 842. Sestertius, Rome. Obv: IVLIA DOMNA AVGVSTA, Rev.: VENERI VICTR S C [BM inv. 1875,0202.16] © The Trustees of the British Museum

¹¹ An apple was located in iconography of *Venus Genetrix* on the coins of Sabina issued by Hadrian (RIC II/3 *Sabina*, no 2576, no 2577). Attribute was multiplied in the coinage of Faustina the Younger (RIC III/3 *Faustina II*, no 511a). And with reverse legend VENERI AVGVSTAE (RIC III/3 *Faustina I*, no 333), VENVS (RIC III/3 *Faustina II*, no 513Aa, no 513Ab) or posthumous issues of Faustina the Elder with reverse legend AVGVSTA (RIC III/3 *Faustina I*, no 366A-366B).

¹² RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 536, no 842.

¹³ See e.g. RIC I/1 *Augustus*, no 123.

¹⁴ RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 535, no 579, no 846.

¹⁵ RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 581 (helmet, shield, also in a variant with standing Cupid or Cupid and a cuirass on the right side), no 888, no 889 (helmet, cuirass), no 890 (helmet, shield).



Fig. 5. RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 581. Denarius, Rome. Obv: IVLIA AVGVSTA, Rev.: VENVS VICTRIX [Münzkabinett der Universität Göttingen inv. UK-01434] public domain Stephan Eckardt, Archäologisches Institut Göttingen, 2016. Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell 4.0 (CC BY-NC 4.0), https://www.kenom.de/objekt/record_DE-MUS-062622_kenom_186736/2/

In 193-196, coins dedicated to Venus Victrix in Emesa and Laodicea ad Mare were struck for Julia Domna. Part of the issue shows a reverse identical to issues from Rome, where Venus, standing with her back turned to the viewer, bent against a low column, holding an apple and sceptre [Fig. 6].¹⁶



Fig. 6. RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 632. Denarius, Emesa / Laodicea ad Mare. Obv IVLIA DOMNA AVGV, Rev.: VENERI VICTR [BM inv. 1860,0330.233] © The Trustees of the British Museum

Iconographically different from the issues minted in Rome, are the issues where Venus naked to waist stands forward, holding an apple in her right outstretched hand, leaning against the sceptre [Fig. 7].¹⁷



Fig. 7. RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 630. Denarius, Emesa / Laodicea ad Mare. Obv IVLIA DOMNA AVGV, Rev.: VENER VICT [BM inv. BNK,R.684] © The Trustees of the British Museum

The third type of reverse of Julia Domna is a depiction of the goddess frontally, leaning on a low column, holding a helmet in her right hand and a palm branch in her left, with a shield depicted at her feet on the left. The *RIC*'s issuers record only issues of the Aureus denomination with this iconography.¹⁸ It should be noted that in

¹⁶ Denarius – RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 632, no 633, no 633A; Aureus – RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 645A.

¹⁷ RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 630, no 631, no 631A.

¹⁸ RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 647.

the collection of the British Museum there is a denarius of similar type, minted in Antiochia ad Orontem,¹⁹ on which, in addition to the attributes found on the aureus issue, a cuirass was added behind the column on the right side [Fig. 8].²⁰



Fig. 8. RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 647. Denarius, Antiochia ad Orontem. Obv: IVLIA AVGVSTA, Rev.: VENVS VICTRIX [BM inv. 1979,0614.35] © The Trustees of the British Museum

The issues of Plautilla are variants of the issues of Julia Domna, with Venus holding an apple in her right hand and a palm tree in her left, but the column from the issue of her mother-in-law has been replaced by an oblong shield, also added at the feet of the goddess is a cupid holding a helmet (?) or an apple (?) [Fig. 9].²¹



Fig. 9. 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>]

¹⁹ Formerly attributed to Laodicea ad Mare.

²⁰ In the description of the object from the British Museum [inv. 1979,0614.35] the cuirass was omitted despite it is clearly visible.

²¹ RIC IV/1 *Plautilla*, no 369, no 579, no 582.

Tab. 1. The issues of women of the imperial family with the reverse legend VENVS VICTRIX (the Authors based on the *RIC*)

| No | Denomination | Mint / Dates | Ruler | Obverse | Reverse | Ref. |
|----|--------------|--------------|-----------------|---|--|----------------|
| 1 | Denarius | Rome 161-176 | Marcus Aurelius | FAVSTINA AVGVSTA – Bust of Faustina the Younger, bare-headed, hair waved and fastened in a bun on back of head, draped, right | VENERI VICTRICI – Venus, naked to the waist, standing right, leaning on column, holding spear in right hand and helmet in left hand | RIC III/3 723 |
| 2 | Aureus | Rome 161-176 | Marcus Aurelius | FAVSTINA AVGVSTA – Bust of Faustina the Younger, bare-headed, hair waved and elaborately coiled and fastened in a bun on back of head, draped, right | VENVS VICTRIX – Venus, draped, standing left, holding Victory in extended right hand and resting left hand on shield on which she-wolf and twins | RIC III/3 736 |
| 3 | As | Rome 161-176 | Marcus Aurelius | FAVSTINA AVGVSTA – Bust of Faustina the Younger, draped, hair elaborately waved in nearly vertical lines and fastened in a low chignon at back of head, down cheek, curls, right | VENERI VICTRICI S C – Venus, half-nude, standing right, holding the right arm of Mars, standing front, head left, and holding a shield on his left arm | RIC III/3 1680 |
| 4 | Sestertius | Rome 161-176 | Marcus Aurelius | FAVSTINA AVGVSTA – Bust of Faustina the Younger, draped, diademed, hair elaborately waved in nearly vertical lines and fastened in a low chignon at back of head round head, down cheek, curls, right | VENERI VICTRICI S C – Venus, draped, standing left, holding Victory in extended right hand and resting left hand on shield on which are the Dioscuri | RIC III/3 1681 |
| 5 | As | Rome 161-176 | Marcus Aurelius | FAVSTINA AVGVSTA – Bust of Faustina the Younger, draped, hair elaborately waved in nearly vertical lines and fastened in a low chignon at back of head, down cheek, curls, right | VENERI VICTRICI S C – Venus, draped, standing left, holding Victory in extended right hand and resting left hand on shield on which are the Dioscuri | RIC III/3 1682 |

| | | | | | | |
|----|--------------------|-----------------|----------------------|---|--|-------------------|
| 6 | Sestertius | Rome 161-176 | Marcus Aurelius | FAVSTINA AVGVSTA – Bust of Faustina the Younger, draped, hair elaborately waved in nearly vertical lines and fastened in a low chignon at back of head, down cheek, curls, right | VENVS VICTRIX S C – Venus, draped, standing left, holding Victory in extended right hand and resting left hand on shield on which are the Dioscuri or she-wolf and twins | RIC III/3 1688 |
| 7 | Denarius | Rome 164-180 | Marcus Aurelius | LVCILLA AVGVSTA – Bust of Lucilla, bare- headed, hair waved and fastened in a bun on back of head, draped, right | VENVS VICTRIX – Venus, draped with right breast bare, standing left, holding Victory in extended right hand and resting left hand on shield set on ground | RIC III/3 786 |
| 8 | Denarius | Rome 164-180 | Marcus Aurelius | LVCILLA AVGVSTA – Bust of Lucilla, bare- headed, hair waved and fastened in a bun on back of head, draped, right | VENVS VICTRIX – Venus, draped with right breast bare, standing left, holding Victory in extended right hand and resting left hand on shield set on ground, at base of shield, helmet | RIC III/3 787 |
| 9 | Aureus | Rome 178-191 | Commodus | CRISPINA AVGVSTA – Bust of Crispina, draped, hair in round coil at back, right | VENVS VICTRIX – Venus, naked to waist, standing right, leaning on column and holding helmet in right hand and sceptre in left hand | RIC III/3 290 |
| 10 | Aureus Denarius | Rome 193-196 | Septimius Severus | IVLIA DOMNA AVG – Bust of Julia Domna, hair waved and coiled at back, draped, right | VENERI VICTR – Venus, with drapery falling below hips, standing with back turned, head right, holding apple in extended right hand and palm sloped to the left in left hand, resting left elbow on column | RIC IV/1 536 |
| 11 | Sestertius | Rome 193-196 | Septimius Severus | IVLIA DOMNA AVG – Bust of Julia Domna, hair waved and coiled at back, draped, right | VENERI VICTR S C – Venus, naked to waist, standing left, holding apple in extended right hand and palm sloped over left shoulder in left hand, resting left elbow on column | RIC IV/1 842 |

| | | | | | | |
|----|--------------------|-----------------|----------------------|--|---|-----------------|
| 12 | Denarius | Rome 193-196 | Septimius Severus | VLIA DOMNA AVG – Bust of Julia Domna, hair waved and coiled at back, draped, right | VENERI VICTOR – Venus, naked to waist, standing right, holding apple in extended right hand and palm sloped over left shoulder in left hand, resting left elbow on column | RIC IV/1 535 |
| 13 | Aureus | Rome 196-211 | Septimius Severus | IVLIA AVGVSTA – Bust of Julia Domna, hair waved and coiled at back, draped, right | VENERI VICTR – Venus, naked to waist, standing right, holding apple in extended right hand and palm sloped over left shoulder in left hand, resting left elbow on column | RIC IV/1 579 |
| 14 | Aureus Denarius | 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 |
| 15 | As Dupondius | Rome 193-196 | Septimius Severus | IVLIA DOMNA AVG – Bust of Julia Domna, hair waved and coiled at back, draped, right | VENERI VICTR S C: – Venus, naked to waist, standing left, holding apple in extended right hand and palm sloped over left shoulder in left hand, resting left elbow on column | RIC IV/1 846 |
| 16 | As Dupondius | Rome 196-211 | Septimius Severus | IVLIA AVGVSTA – Bust of Julia Domna, hair waved and coiled at back, draped, right | VENVS VICTRIX S C – 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; | RIC IV/1 888 |
| 17 | Dupondius | Rome 196-211 | Septimius Severus | IVLIA AVGVSTA – Bust of Julia Domna, hair waved and coiled at back, draped, right | VENVS VICTRIX S C – 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; behind column, cuirass | RIC IV/1 889 |

| | | | | | | |
|----|------------------------|---|----------------------|--|--|------------------|
| 18 | As Dupondius | Rome 196-211 | Septimius Severus | IVLIA AVGVSTA – Bust of Julia Domna, hair waved and coiled at back, draped, right | VENVS VICTRIX S C – 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/1 890 |
| 19 | Denarius | Laodicea ad Mare? Emesa? 193-196 | Septimius Severus | IVLIA DOMNA AVG – Bust of Julia Domna, hair waved and coiled at back, draped, right | VENER VICT – Venus, draped, standing left, holding apple in extended right hand and sceptre in left hand | RIC IV/1 630 |
| 20 | Denarius Sestertius | Laodicea ad Mare? Emesa? 193-196 | Septimius Severus | IVLIA DOMNA AVG – Bust of Julia Domna, hair waved and coiled at back, draped, right | VENERI VICT – Venus, draped, standing left, holding apple in extended right hand and sceptre in left hand | RIC IV/1 631 |
| 21 | Denarius | Laodicea ad Mare? Emesa? 193-196 | Septimius Severus | IVLIA DOMNA AVG– Bust of Julia Domna, hair waved and coiled at back, draped, right | VENER VICTOR – Venus, draped, standing left, raising up right hand and holding sceptre in left hand | RIC IV/1 631A |
| 22 | Denarius | Laodicea ad Mare? Emesa? 193-196 | Septimius Severus | IVLIA DOMNA AVG – Bust of Julia Domna, hair waved and coiled at back, draped, right | VENERI VICTR – Venus, naked to waist, standing left, holding apple in extended right hand and palm sloped over left shoulder in left hand, resting left elbow on column | RIC IV/1 632 |
| 23 | Denarius | Laodicea ad Mare? Emesa? 193-196 | Septimius Severus | IVLIA DOMNA AVG – Bust of Julia Domna, hair waved and coiled at back, draped, right | VENER VICTOR – Venus, naked to waist, standing left, holding apple in extended right hand and palm sloped over left shoulder in left hand, resting left elbow on column | RIC IV/1 633 |
| 24 | Denarius | Laodicea ad Mare? Emesa? 193-196 | Septimius Severus | IVLIA DOMNA AVG – Bust of Julia Domna, hair waved and coiled at back, draped, right | VENERI VICTRICI – Venus, naked to waist, standing left, holding apple in extended right hand and palm sloped over left shoulder in left hand, resting left elbow on column | RIC IV/1 633A |

| | | | | | | |
|----|--------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|--|--|------------------|
| 25 | Aureus | Laodicea ad Mare? 196-202 | Septimius Severus | IVLIA AVGVSTA– Bust of Julia Domna, hair waved and coiled at back, draped, right | VENVS VICTR – Venus, naked to waist, standing left, holding apple in extended right hand and palm sloped over left shoulder in left hand, resting left elbow on column | RIC IV/1 645A |
| 26 | Aureus | Laodicea ad Mare? 196-202 | 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/1 647 |
| 27 | Aureus Denarius | Rome 202-205 | Caracalla | PLAVTILLA AVGVSTA – Bust of Plautilla, hair firmly waved and drawn down on neck, draped, right | VENVS VICTRIX – Venus, naked to waist, standing left, holding apple in extended right hand and palm in left hand, resting left elbow on shield; at feet, left, Cupid | RIC IV/1 369 |
| 28 | Sestertius | Rome 202-204 | Caracalla | PLAVTILLA AVGVSTA – Bust of Plautilla, hair coiled in ridges, fastened in bun at back, draped, right | VENVS VICTRIX S C – Venus, draped, standing right, holding apple in extended right hand and palm in left hand, and leaning on shield; to left, Cupid with helmet | RIC IV/1 579 |
| 29 | As Dupondius | Rome 202-204 | Caracalla | PLAVTILLA AVGVSTA – Bust of Plautilla, hair coiled in ridges, fastened in bun at back, draped, right | VENVS VICTRIX S C – Venus, draped, standing right, holding apple in extended right hand and palm in left hand, and leaning on shield; to left, Cupid with helmet | RIC IV/1 582 |

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 emperor's issues, the standing goddess holds a statue of Victoria in her right hand, and in her left, which she rests on a shield placed on her helmet, she holds a spear [Fig. 10].²² Coins were also minted, with Venus holding a helmet in her right hand instead of Victoria, a sceptre in her left hand instead of a spear, and figures of two seated captives were added [Fig. 11].²³



Fig. 10. RIC IV/1 *Caracalla*, no 310b. Antoninianus, Rome. Obv ANTONINVS PIVS AVG GERM, Rev.: VENERI VICTRICI [BM inv. R.15494] © The Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 11. RIC IV/1 *Caracalla*, no 312C. Antoninianus, Rome. Obv ANTONINVS PIVS AVG GERM, Rev.: VENVS VICTRIX [BM inv. BNK,R.717] © The Trustees of the British Museum

Discussion

There are four types of legends on the obverses of Julia Maesa, all written in nominativ.²⁴ In all cases, in addition to the *cognomen*, the title *augusta* is mentioned in both abbreviated (AVG)²⁵ and full form (AVGVSTA)²⁶. In posthumous issues, the name Julia was replaced by the term *diva*.²⁷

Iconography of the obverse of the first type shows a bust of Julia Maesa in drapery, with wavy hair tied up low in the back [Fig. 12].²⁸ The other differs only in the addition of a diadem on the head of the *augusta* [Fig. 13].²⁹ The unique issue depicts a bust

²² RIC IV/1 *Caracalla*, no 310A, no 310B, no 311A, no 311B, 311C, no 311D, no 574, no 575A, no 577A, no 577B.

²³ RIC IV/1 *Caracalla*, no 312A, no 312B, no 312C, no 312D.

²⁴ Form MAISI AVG (RIC IV/2 *Severus Alexander*, no 310a, no 310c) is present only on the reverse of denarius of Severus Alexander.

²⁵ RIC IV/2 *Julia Maesa*, no 249-279, no 377-380, no 410-413, no 416-419, no 421-424.

²⁶ RIC IV/2 *Julia Maesa*, no 409, no 414-415, no 420, no 712-714.

²⁷ RIC IV/2 *Julia Maesa*, no 377-380, no 712, no 714.

²⁸ RIC IV/2 *Julia Maesa*, no 249-254, no 257, no 261-263, no 266-279, no 377-378, no 380, no 410-413, no 416, no 419, no 421, no 423-424.

²⁹ RIC IV/2 *Julia Maesa*, no 255-256, no 258-260, no 265, no 409, no 414-415, no 417-418, no 420, no 422.

of Maesa (diadem variant) placed on a crescent [Fig. 14]³⁰. This type of depiction was introduced in the issues of Julia Domna minted by Caracalla.³¹ Part of the posthumous issues with the legend CONSECRATIO on the reverse, shows a bust of Julia Maesa, wearing a veil, facing right [Fig. 15].³²



Fig. 12. RIC IV/2 *Julia Maesa*, no 249. Denarius, Rome. Obv.: IVLIA MAESA AVG. Rev.: FECVNDITAS AVG [BM inv. 1938,0207.46] © The Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 13. RIC IV/2 *Julia Maesa*, no 424. Dupondius, Rome. Obv.: IVLIA MAESA AVG. Rev.: SAECVLI FELICITAS SC [BM inv. R.16111] © The Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 14. RIC IV/2 *Julia Maesa*, no 264. Antoninianus, Rome. Obv.: IVLIA MAESA AVG. Rev.: PIETAS AVG [BM inv. 1937,0406.34] © The Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 15. RIC IV/2 *Julia Maesa*, no 712. Sestertius, Rome. Obv.: DIVA MAESA AVGVSTA. Rev.: CONSECRATIO SC [BM inv. 1872,0709.809] © The Trustees of the British Museum

The image on the reverse is especially interesting. It seems to combine features of several traditional goddesses and yet attributed as VENVS VICTRIX in inscription.

³⁰ RIC IV/2 *Julia Maesa*, no 264; The symbol of a crescent is not new on the imperial coins (RIC I/1 *Augustus*, no 300, no 539-540, RIC II/3 *Hadrian*, no 865-866, no 3082, no 852-853, RIC III/3 *Faustina I*, no 1199a-b, RIC III/3 *Faustina II*, no 750). It also appears in coinage as one of the elements of the attribution of the goddess Diana (RIC II/1 *Nerva*, no 11, RIC II/3 *Hadrian*, no 2918, RIC III/3 *Faustina II*, no 1716, RIC IV/1 *Caracalla*, no 284a-d, RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 548, no 638, no 851, no 871) and Luna with an epithet LVCIFERA (RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 379a-c).

³¹ RIC IV/1 *Julia Domna*, no 379a, no 387, no 388a, no 389a; RIC IV/1 *Caracalla*, no 36a-b, no 52, no 59a-c, no 125a-b.

³² RIC IV/2 *Julia Maesa*, no 379, no 712-714; Issues of Maesa with a legend CONSECRATIO on reverse, depict the augusta on obverse in according to the first type (RIC IV/2 *Julia Maesa*, no 377-378).

The cornucopia relate her with the functions of Fortuna who is the goddess most often depicted with this attribute. The cornucopia mark abundance and nourishment and could be related with fertility which is, to an extent, a domain of Venus, however seemingly rather distant from the victorious aspect of the deity. In such case, the Victorious Venus or Venus of the Victories (of the Victorious?) would appropriate a mark which is not clearly connected with winning. The explanation of such combination could be personal religious experience cultivated within Severan family or addressing the message to the addressees who identify victory with abundance, like soldiers, for whom won battle or war would assure abundance of loot. These two possibilities are not mutually exclusive.

One of the most difficult objects on the reverse of the discussed coin is the *cardiophylax* worn by the personage. It was most likely originally shaped in form of the head of Medusa which relate the personage with Athena. Naturally, at the current state of preservation, this cannot be treated with full certainty however it is usually Athena who wears gorgoneion at her chest, attached to aegis. In the discussed depiction the aegis is missing and the element seems to hang on four chains running over the shoulders and at the waist. Such chains crossed at chest and back with the decorative elements at the junctions are well attested in Roman jewellery. It is clear that the discussed coin did not follow the oriental patterns however reduction of the folds of aegis to the chains or straps might result from either understanding of the device as related to power or associating it with jewellery. Such polysematism would be perfectly well understood in eastern provinces where the imageries intermingled.

The radiate helmet untypical for female deities may intentionally mark Dea Syria in her Urania hypostasis. The helmet itself is not a typical attribute of Venus, moving the image closer to Athena again however the headgear is the closest to the “Armenian” crowns of Antiochus of Commagene [Fig. 16].³³ It must be a superficial similarity which results from the same pattern of adding the rays to the top of the headgear. The rays of light correspond with radiating nature of the deity linking her with heavenly dimension. It can be the association with the planet Venus which is also an epiphany of Urania. It must be borne in mind that even when changing an epithet the goddess remains an entity, so heavenly dimension of Venus would apply to her victorious version. In eastern provinces the goddess of the planet Venus would instantly absorb the local deities associated with that celestial body.

The association of the crown of Venus on the discussed crown with the “Armenian” crown of Antiochus of Commagene gains more merit if compared with iconography of Atargatis. The relief of Atargatis accompanied by Hadad, from Dura Europos [Fig. 17] shows her in a *kalathos* decorated with the row of triangles running around the cylin-

³³ Rose, 2013.

drical head-gear.³⁴ The preservation of the depictions on the coins does not allow to determine if triangular protrusions or decorations on the body of the *kalathoi* existed originally. What seems important to note is that *kalathos* and/or *corona muralis* became her attribute in imperial era but the coins from 4th century BCE [Figs. 18-19] show her wearing a head-gear with the row of four triangular protrusions at the top³⁵ which is very similar with the depiction on the discussed coin from the British Museum. Despite the chronological gap, the analogy is very clear and must not be ignored. It is possible that the triangular extensions on the crown of the Syrian goddess were attempted to be reconciled with the shape of the *kalathos* by moving them down and fitting them on the body of the cylinder which resulted in the form attested by the relief from Dura Europos. It is possible and even likely that similar patterns simply obliterated. An important clue on the relief from Dura Europos is that the head-gear of Atargatis differs from that of Hadad whose *kalathos* is decorated with the spiral lines instead of triangles. This strongly suggests that the triangular decoration was an original attribute of Atargatis and “Armenian” tiaras borrowed this element, perhaps as denominating connection with Syria. In such a case, the figure of Venus *Victrix* would refer to older models which could be still legible locally, even if not becoming part of imperial iconographic complex of Atargatis. Employment of ancient already attribute of the Syrian goddess would be yet another appropriation of the iconographic elements of other deities fitted to Venus *Victrix* on the discussed coin. This reference to the older Syrian tradition might indicate that the designed target group for the message of the coin were inhabitants of Syria.

Combination of the attributes associated with Tyche, Athena and Aphrodite Urania under label of Venus *Victrix* is a deliberate act which implies the particular vision of the dynastic cult but also indicates the addressed audience who is expected to understand the message in terms of abundance, victory and associate the coin both in imperial perspective and in terms of local deities of similar or just overlapping fields.

³⁴ Butcher, 2007: fig. 1.

³⁵ Butcher, 2007: fig. 14.



Fig. 16. Detail of the heads of Antiochus I of Commagene, 70-31 BCE, Arsameia on the Nymphaios³⁶



Fig. 17. Detail of the heads of Atargatis, 2nd or 3rd century CE. Dura-Europos³⁷



Fig. 18. Atargatis. Obverse of the Stater of Manbog (Hierapolis), late 4th century BCE³⁸



Fig. 19. Atargatis. Obverse of the Didrachm of Abdahad (Hierapolis), c. 342-331 BCE³⁹

Herodian emphasises the role of Julia Maesa in overthrowing the rule of Macrinus (r. 217-218) and restoring the Severan dynasty to the imperial throne.⁴⁰ Particularly noteworthy in the context of the present discussion are the passages of his work describing the payment by Julia Maesa of a revolt of Roman soldiers and the proclamation of her grandson Heliogabalus as emperor (r. 218-222). According to Herodian, after the assassination of Caracalla and the death of Julia Domna, Macrinus ordered Maesa to return to her native Emesa, but allowed her to keep all the wealth she had accumulated during the reign of Septimius Severus (r. 193-211) and Caracalla.

Julia, wife of Severus and mother of Caracalla, had a sister, Maesa, a Phoenician named after the city of Emesa in that country. During her sister's imperial career, the many years that Severus and Caracalla were emperors, this woman lived in the imperial palace.

³⁶ Photo by Verity Cridland [Public Domain:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nemrut_Dag_area_A_Commagine_carving.jpg]

³⁷ Photo credit: Yale University Art Gallery.

³⁸ After Butcher, 2007: fig. 14, drawing by Patryk Skupniewicz.

³⁹ After [Public Domain:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nemrut_Dag_area_A_Commagine_carving.jpg], drawing by Patryk Skupniewicz.

⁴⁰ Discussion in Kemezis, 2016: 350-351; Scott, 2018: 85-86; Conesa Navarro, 2019:189-191.

After the assassination of Caracalla and Julia's death, Macrinus ordered Maesa to return to her own estates in Phoenicia, allowing her to live there in full possession of her property. Since Maesa had lived for a long time under imperial protection, she had amassed a huge personal fortune. Thus the old woman now went off to live on her estates.⁴¹

He also mentioned that Maesa was ready to pay the army off for restoring the Sevirs to power: “Maesa was rumored to be enormously wealthy, and it was reported that she would immediately give all her money to the soldiers if they restored the empire to her family.”⁴² The mutiny was initiated by *Legio III Gallica* stationing in the fortified headquarters at Raphanea near Emesa. The soldiers of the other camps joined tempted, according to Herodian, with the hope of receiving money from Julia Maesa.

These matters were reported to Macrinus while he was at Antioch, and the rumor quickly spread through the rest of the armies that the son of Caracalla had been found and that the sister of Julia was handing out money. Believing everything that was said and accepting it as true, the soldiers were deeply stirred. They were moved by hatred of Macrinus and pity for the memory of Caracalla; these considerations persuaded them to support a change of emperors. More than any other factor, however, the hope of money influenced their decision, and many soldiers voluntarily deserted to the new Caracalla.⁴³

On May 16, 218 Heliogabal was proclaimed emperor, and to strengthen his claim to power, the new emperor took the names of his supposed father,⁴⁴ Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.

⁴¹ Hdn 5.3.2: Μαῖσα ἦν τις ὄνομα, τὸ γένος Φοίνισσα, ἀπὸ Ἐμέσου καλουμένης οὕτω πόλεως ἐν Φοινίκη· ἀδελφὴ δὲ ἐγεγόνει Ἰουλίας τῆς Σεβήρου μὲν γυναικὸς Ἀντωνίνου δὲ μητρός. παρὰ πάντα οὖν τὸν τῆς ἀδελφῆς βίον ἐν τῇ βασιλείῳ διέτριπεν αὐτῆς χρόνον πολυετοῦς, παρ' ὃν Σεβήρος τε καὶ Ἀντωνίνος ἐβασίλευσαν. τὴν δὴ Μαῖσαν ταύτην ὁ Μακρίνος, μετὰ τὴν τῆς ἀδελφῆς τελευτὴν Ἀντωνίνου δὲ ἀναίρεσιν, προσέταξεν εἰς τὴν πατρίδα ἐπανελθοῦσαν ἐν τοῖς οἰκείοις καταβῖῶναι, πάντα ἔχουσαν τὰ ἑαυτῆς. πλείστον δὲ ἦν χρημάτων ἀνάπλεως ἅτε μακρῷ χρόνῳ βασιλικῆ ἐξουσίᾳ ἐντεθραμμένη. ἐπανελθοῦσα δὲ ἡ πρεσβυτικὴ διέτριβεν ἐν τοῖς ἑαυτῆς; see also HA *Macr.* 9.1: *Fuit aliqua mulier Maesa sive Varia ex Emesena urbe, soror Iuliae uxoris Severi Pertinacis Afri, quae post mortem Antonini Bassiani ex aulica domo fuerat expulsa per Macrini superbiam; cui quidem omnia concessit Macrinus, quae diu illa collegerat*; Cass. Dio 79.30.3-4.

⁴² Hdn. 5.3.11: τῆ δὲ Μαίση ἐλέγετο σωροὺς εἶναι χρημάτων, ἐκείνην δὲ ἐτόιμωσ πάντα προσέσθαι τοῖς στρατιώταις, εἰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῷ γένει ἀνανεώσαιτο.

⁴³ Hdn. 5.4.1-2: ὡς δὲ ταῦτα ἀπηγγέλη τῷ Μακρίνῳ ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ διατρίβοντι, ἢ τε φήμη διέδραμεν ἀνὰ τὰ λοιπὰ στρατόπεδα ὅτι τε Ἀντωνίνου υἱὸς εὐρέθη καὶ ὅτι «ἡ» Ἰουλίας ἀδελφὴ χρημάτων δίδωσι, πάντα τὰ λεγόμενα καὶ ἐνδεχόμενα καὶ ἀληθῆ πιστεύσαντες εἶναι τὰς ψυχὰς ἐξεπτόητο. ἐνήγε δ' αὐτοὺς καὶ ἀνέπειθεν εἰς πραγμάτων καινοτομίαν τὸ τε Μακρίνου μῖσος καὶ «τὸ» Ἀντωνίνου τῆς μνήμης πάθος, καὶ πρό γε ἀπάντων ἢ τῶν χρημάτων ἐλπίς, ὡς πολλοὺς καὶ αὐτομολοῦντας φοιτᾶν πρὸς τὸν νέον Ἀντωνίνον.

⁴⁴ For this reason, the ringleaders of the revolt spread the rumor that Maesa's grandson Varius Avitus Bassianus was the illegitimate son of Caracalla (Hdn. 5.3.10; Cass. Dio 79.32.2). Although Caracalla's biographer wrote that he left behind a son, Heliogabalus (HA *Carac.* 9.2), there is no doubt that this genealogy is false, see Rowan, 2012: 164-165; On the early portraits of Heliogabalus, which were

On June 8, near Antioch, mutinous troops defeated the army of Macrinus.⁴⁵ Julia Maesa was officially honored with a title of *augusta*, despite the fact that she was “only” a grandmother of the emperor.⁴⁶

In the context of the current discussion, attention should also be drawn to the issues of Septimius Severus minted at Eastern mints during the years of the power struggle (193-195), dedicated to the Fortuna Redux [Tab. 2]. The reverses of these coins depict the goddess standing, holding sceptre and cornucopiae [Fig. 20],⁴⁷ and thus with identical attributes to those held by Venus on the coin of Julia Maesa from the British Museum collection [Fig. 1]. The association of the goddess Fortuna/Tyche with Julia Domna is confirmed by the honorific Greek inscription from Nicopolis in Moesia Inferior, in which the *augusta* is even identified with the goddess.⁴⁸ The foundation for the legitimacy of Heliogabalus’ power was kinship with Severus, but these were family ties in the female line. Thus, it seems that in the case of the coin of Maesa, one can find an attempt to ideologically associate Julia Maesa with her older sister.



Fig. 20. RIC IV/1 *Septimius Severus*, no 388, Denarius. Emesa? Cappadocia?, Obv.: IMP CAE L SEP SEV PERT AVG COS II, Rev.: FORT REDVC [BM inv. R1946,1004.801] © The Trustees of the British Museum

deliberately modeled on Caracalla’s iconography so as to show their physical resemblance, see Harl, 1981; Johnston, 1982.

⁴⁵ Hdn. 5.4.6; According to Dio, Julia Maesa and Julia Soemias prevented the rebelled soldiers from escaping in the decisive battle in vicinity of Antioch leading to the defeat of Macrinus, see Cass. Dio 79.38.4: τὸ δὲ δὴ στρατεύματα αὐτοῦ ἀσθενέστατα ἠγωνίσασατο, καὶ εἴ γε μὴ ἡ τε Μαῖσα καὶ ἡ Σοαμίς ἔσυνῆσαν γὰρ ἤδη τῷ παιδίῳ ἀπὸ τε τῶν ὀχημάτων καταπηδήσασαι καὶ ἐς τοὺς φεύγοντας ἐσπεσοῦσαι ἐπέσχον αὐτοὺς τῆς φυγῆς ὀδύρομενα, καὶ ἐκεῖνο σπασάμενον τὸ ξιφίδιον, ὃ παρέζωστο, ὠφθη σφίσι ἐπὶ ἵππου θεῖα τινὶ φορᾷ ὥς καὶ ἐς τοὺς ἐναντίους ἐλάσον, οὐκ ἂν ποτε ἔστησαν.

⁴⁶ In 218, Kettenhofen, 1979: 145; the exact date cannot be determined, see Kienast, 2004: 181; see RIC IV/2 *Julia Maesa*, no 208 (Obv.: IMP ANTONINVS PIVS AVG, Rev.: IVLIA MAESA AVG).

⁴⁷ Identical attribution is found in only three other issues of 1/ senatorial sesterius series, minted in Rome in 80-81, see RIC II/1 *Titus*, no 141-144 [Obv.: IMP T CAES VESP AVG P M TR P P P COS VIII, Rev.: FELICIT AVGVST S C]; Aureus minted in Rome in 139-141, by Antoninus Pius, see RIC III/3 *Faustina I.*, no 337 [Obv.: FAVSTINA AVGVSTA, Rev.: CONCORDIA AVG] and on denarii from Rome, minted 218-222, see RIC IV/2 *Elagabalus*, no 113 [Obv.: IMP ANTONINVS PIVS AVG, Rev.: LIBERTAS AVG].

⁴⁸ C.f. Kettenhofen, 1979: 107-108: Ἀγαθῆι τύχηι. | Ἰουλίαν Δόμναν Σε(βαστήν), | Τύχην τῆς Οἰκουμένης, μητέρα τοῦ θειοτάτου καὶ ἀνεκίτη[υ] | Αὐτοκράτορος Ἀντωνινεῖνου, βουλῆ, δῆμος | τῆς λαμπροτάτης Ἰστριανῶν πόλεως.

Tab. 2. The issues of Septimius Severus with women standing, holding sceptre and cornucopiae on the reverse (the Authors based on the *RIC*)

| No | Denomination | Mint / Dates | Ruler | Obverse | Reverse | Ref. |
|----|--------------|--|-------------------|--|---|------------------|
| 1 | Denarius | Emesa? ⁴⁹ Cappadocia? ⁵⁰ 194-195 | Septimius Severus | IMP CAE L SEP SEV PERT AVG COS II – Head of Septimius Severus, laureate, right | FORT REDVC – Fortuna (?), draped, standing left, holding cornucopiae in right hand and sceptre in left hand | RIC IV/1 388 |
| 2 | Denarius | Laodicea ad Mare 193 | Septimius Severus | L SEPT SEV PERT AVG IMP I– Head of Septimius Severus, laureate, right | FORT REDVC – Fortuna (?), draped, standing left, holding cornucopiae in right hand and sceptre in left hand | RIC IV/1 439 |
| 3 | Denarius | Laodicea ad Mare 194 | Septimius Severus | L SEPT SEV PERTE AVG IMP II – Head of Septimius Severus, laureate, right | FORT REDVC – Fortuna, draped, standing left, holding cornucopiae in right hand and sceptre in left hand | RIC IV/1 449 |
| 4 | Denarius | Laodicea ad Mare 194 | Septimius Severus | L SEPT SEV PERT AVG IMP II – Head of Septimius Severus, laureate, right | FORT RDEV (sic!) – Fortuna, draped, standing left, holding cornucopiae in right hand and sceptre in left hand | RIC IV/1 449A |

Conclusions

The denarius of Julia Maesa from British Museum, especially the reverse, is a unique example of iconographic bricolage which might indicate the context of the emission and propose its exact dating. The personage on the reverse of the coin is described as Venus *Victrix* who is “a kind of dynastic deity” among the female members of the Severan dynasty. At the same time, the series of differences with the former depictions of the goddess in her *Victrix* epiphany appear. In fact, iconographically, personage refers to several goddesses but no direct connection with former core Venus *Victrix* elements are seen. Obviously, as was illustrated, the process of iconographic appropriation of the elements originally belonging to other deities had begun earlier and tradition of syncretic, or even eclectic, employment of the symbols in order to

⁴⁹ After: RIC IV/1, p.143.

⁵⁰ According to the website of the British Museum [BM inv. R1946,1004.801].

illustrate widened ideas of the supernatural was attested earlier. Nevertheless, in case of the denarius from the British Museum, the matter exceeds by far swapping the elements between semantically closely-related goddesses like Venus *Victrix* and Victoria. The goddess on the discussed coin seems to relate to her denomination mainly, unless only, by inscription. At the same time, the headgear of the deity, is clearly related with traditional iconography of Atargatis which varies from the *kalathoi*, she is depicted wearing, in imperial art. Also, the aspects of abundance are strongly emphasised, with some reference to Athena, which seemingly diminishes the relation with violence. The staff held by the goddess might be interpreted as a spear however it also clearly refers to the long sceptres with the ball at the butts. The element cannot be unambiguously identified as a weapon. The message thus appears to emphasise highlight the authority, prosperity resulting from the good and justified governance and reverence for Syrian tradition. Description highlights the reference with the traditional Venus *Victrix* veneration among the Severan female dynasts. It might point to the strong and personal attitude to the goddess among the women of the Severan dynasty, however bricolage nature of the currently discussed depiction may reveal that understanding of the goddess exceeded the traditional boundaries of the female deities. Freedom with which Julia Maesa juggles with the attributes and still attributes the personage as Venus *Victrix* prove that the set of ideas related to the goddess was far wider than traditional which in turn might point to personal piety and individual relationship with the goddess. It is the personal cognition of the deity that allows application of different attributes.

On the other hand, the selection of the attributes may result from the very specific political situation in which the emission was minted. The reference to abundance, rightful authority through continuation of the dynastic cult and Syrian traditions, together with avoidance of the elements that would be directly associated with violence, suggests that the emission was directed for the army after defeating Macrinus. Even though it was the military victory that brought the Severs back to power, the elements of violence were avoided as the victory was achieved in civil strife so blood-shed considered the fellow citizens. The local, Syrian elements not only highlight the origin of Maesa and her connection with Domna but, apparently, are well addressed to the Syrian troops and population.

So the coin would contain several layers or sets of meaning, all overlapping but expressing different aspects and serving different purposes. Spiritually, the religious piety for Syrian goddess marks the specific model of religiosity based on personal cognition of the deity rather than traditional forms. Politically, it announces that the power is returned to the right dynasty whose religious traditions are cultivated. Militarily, the coin refers to the abundance-bringing victory avoiding to emphasise blood-shed. It promises good fortune to the soldiers of the victorious army which serves the rightful rulers. The coin also addresses the reverence to the old Syrian

traditions to the local population whose support was needed after defeating of Macrinus.

This allows to propose year 218 as the year of emission and its place as Emesa.⁵¹ The question whether the coins were minted to pay the already victorious army, or were these the coins which were to tempt the troops to join the forces of Heliogabal, cannot be firmly replied. It is likely that the promise of reward and lack of references to violence was the message directed to the soldiers and local officials, still expected to turn sides. This would allow narrowing the mint date to first four-five months of year 218, predating even the final victory over the forces of Macrinus. It is tempting to date the emission between May 16th and Jun 8th, however if the coins were to tempt the soldiers to change sides they might have been issued already earlier, so the date of imperial proclamation of Heliogabalus might be of lesser importance. Also, it is difficult to state if the matrices could be prepared and coins minted in such a short time.

⁵¹ Brenot (2000: 339) has claimed that three easter mints are Emesa, Laodycea ad Mare and Aleksandria. Gitler and Poting (2007: 376) maintain that the easter mints were Emesa and Laodycea ad Mare.

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To cite this article: 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>



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