

The Domitian II coin from Chalgrove: a Gallic emperor returns to history

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A single coin discovered in a field at Chalgrove, Oxfordshire, UK, has proved to have an exceptional significance in the world of Roman numismatics. It features a third-century emperor, Domitianus, unknown apart from a find of 1900 from a vineyard in Cléons previously described as 'doubtful'. The dies used to strike the two coins match, leaving little doubt that Domitianus was a real person, although of somewhat fleeting dominion over the Gallic Empire – for a brief period in AD 271.

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The Gallic Empire

The year AD 260 saw arguably Rome's greatest military humiliation: the capture of Valerian, the senior reigning emperor, by the Sassanian Persian Empire. The repercussions stretched across the Roman world. The eastern campaign was lost and the situation was only stabilised by the rise of Palmyra (which itself soon showed separatist tendencies). In the west, Valerian's son Gallienus had to contend with a more direct challenge to his dynasty, which was now stigmatised by the scandal of his father's enslavement. Gallienus's son Saloninus had been left in charge of the Rhine forces but was soon confronted and assassinated by one of his own officers, Postumus. This left the emperor at Rome facing a power block almost as large and powerful as his own: the Gallic Empire. Postumus, as the emperor of this new regime, adopted all the trappings of the 'Central' Empire. This included a copious coinage which tells us that he took titles in imitation of the legitimate emperor while archaeology (see below) presents a picture of a parallel court at Trier with a Praetorian Guard headed by his eventual successor Victorinus. Postumus faced rebellion on the frontier headed by Laelian who was swiftly dealt with, but was brought down by the hostility of his own troops when he refused to allow them to loot the city of Mainz which had been the stronghold of his foe (AD 269). A brief interlude under Marius followed but within the year Victorinus was in charge. His realm was smaller than that of Postumus, for Spain had refused to recognise him and had returned to the fold of the central authority. Victorinus was also to lose control of the Rhône and Raetia, but the Gallic Empire limped on, with power passing to the last usurper in the form of Gaius Pius Esuvius Tetricus and his young son in AD 271. (Victorinus's demise was reportedly due to his outrageous conduct towards his courtiers' wives.) It took the exceptional military skills of Aurelian (AD 270-5) to re-unite the empire. Surprisingly, Tetricus's defeat at Châlons-sur-Marne in AD 274 resulted, not in death, but retirement to

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a governorship in the south of Italy. He lived into old age in contrast to Aurelian, who was assassinated the year following his great achievement.

Gallic Empire coins

The main denomination of coins produced for the Gallic Empire in the third century show a bust of the emperor surmounted by rays of the sun, and are today termed ‘radiates’ in lieu of their ancient name. They are often considered the most miserable coin types of the whole Roman series. Even at its inception in AD 215 the denomination was an alloy of only below half silver and had to be treated in a process of surface enrichment to maintain a deceitfully silvery sheen. Such a process involves the coin blank being dipped in acid to leach out the base material from just the surface of the alloy, leaving the silver (Ponting *pers. comm.*). By the AD 260s the amount of silver in the alloy had sunk to below five per cent and had to be disguised with a thin surface wash of silver (usually lost during archaeological burial if not sweated off beforehand in a nefarious process known to have been proscribed in antiquity). Alongside the progressive silver debasement of the third-century radiate went a massive increase in production and decline in quality control.

Radiate hoards are regularly unearthed in Britain, especially by detectorists, and make up the majority of the 50+ coin treasure cases seen annually by the British Museum. The largest British coin hoard from any period of the island’s history was the 54 951 radiates found at Mildenhall, Wiltshire at the site of the Roman town of Cunetio. Discovered in 1978, the Cunetio hoard was subsequently acquired by the British Museum. Its catalogue (Besly & Bland 1983) made a considerable contribution to our knowledge of third-century radiates. This was followed by the discovery of 47 909 radiates at Normanby, Lincolnshire in 1985 (catalogue by Bland & Burnett 1988).

The Chalgrove coin

The coin hoard found by metal detectorist Brian Malin near Chalgrove in April 2003 consisted of nearly 5000 radiates of the AD 250s-70s fused together within a third-century Romano-British greyware pot (Figure 1).

The 2003 find is in fact the second known to have come from Chalgrove; the same finder (and his brother) unearthed a similar radiate hoard of the same period in 1989 barely 30m away (Chalgrove I). Indeed the two Chalgrove hoards might have originally been deposited by the same owner (Mairat 2009: 116-7) who did not want to keep all his eggs in the same basket and had split his wealth into two roughly equal parts.

After an initial examination at Oxford’s Ashmolean Museum, the Chalgrove II hoard was taken to the British Museum conservation laboratory in order to be picked apart and cleaned (by conservators Simon Dove and Abby Dickson). Identification initially showed a composition typical of such hoards. Issues ranged from Trebonianus Gallus (AD 251-3) to Probus (AD 276-82), but the overwhelming majority of coins were those from the time of maximum debasement – AD 260-70 (AD 268-74 for the usurper emperors of the breakaway Gallic regime). Identifying a radiate hoard involves



Figure 1. Part of the Chalgrove II treasure case (British Museum ref. 2003 T83) prior to conservation (photograph © British Museum).

poring over prolific issues of historically little-recognised emperors made familiar only through the disproportionately massive output of their mints: Gallienus (AD 253-68), Claudius II (268-70), Postumus (260-9), Victorinus (269-71) and Tetricus I and II (271-4).

Chalgrove's Domitianus coin

However, one coin stood out (Figure 2). Its reverse had a standing figure of *Concordia Militum*, ostensibly a stock personification on Roman coins representing the oft-desired harmony between emperor and army. Its remarkable feature was the heavily-bearded bust labelled: IMP C DOMITIANVS P F AVG (Abdy 2004 for initial publication). Although this formula was familiar on third-century coins – *Imperator Caesar Domitianus Pius* (dutiful) *Felix* (fortunate) *Augustus* – the name was not. The name Domitian usually refers to the first-century emperor (AD 81-96), Suetonius's twelfth Caesar, who was remote in time by the age of the radiates and, being subject to the *damnatio memoriae*, was never commemorated after his demise. A late third-century usurper at Alexandria, Domitius Domitianus (AD 297), was also too far away both in time and space. *The prosopography of the later Roman Empire* (Jones *et al.* 1971) lists our Domitianus as:

'Usurper under Aurelian, quickly suppressed Zos. 1.49.2. Possibly in Gaul, where a coin of doubtful authenticity was found with the legend 'Imp. C. Domitianus p. f. Aug.'
RIC Vol. 2, 590.



Figure 2. *The Oxfordshire Domitian II coin (photograph © British Museum).*

The Cléons coin

The coin, described in the citation above as of doubtful authenticity, was found during agricultural work in a vineyard at Cléons (Haute-Goulaine, Loire-Atlantique), in 1900. It was included in a hoard of 1456 radiates subsequently published in *La Revue Numismatique* (1901) by Col. François-Maurice Allotte de la Fuÿe. The earliest coin of the hoard was of Gordian III (AD 238-44) and the latest were of Aurelian (AD 270-5, but the coins present are issues of up to AD 273) and Tetricus (AD 271-4). Allotte de la Fuÿe recognised the Domitianus coin as resembling the Gallic emperors Victorinus and Tetricus. He proposed a tentative link to a historically recorded Domitianus, who had come to notice helping to defeat the usurper Macrianus in the Balkans in AD 262. He was apparently a senior officer under Aureolus, Gallienus's generalissimo, who later rebelled against the emperor at Milan in AD 268 (*SHA The two Gallieni* II, 6; *SHA The thirty pretenders* XIII, 3 and XII, 14). Allotte de la Fuÿe therefore proposed that the coin could have been issued in AD 262 in the Balkans, or, given the style of the coin, later on in Gaul around the time of Tetricus with the same historical Domitianus somehow becoming an unrecorded competitor for the Gallic emperors. The story was further complicated by the mention in Zosimus's *New history* (1.49) of a certain Domitianus 'punished' (?executed) at Rome around AD 271 under Aurelian (Trans. Ridley 1982). A third possibility in Allotte de la Fuÿe's (1901: 324) mind was therefore that Zosimus's Domitian, perhaps the same victor of AD 262 and the rebel of AD 268, produced the coin in Rome about AD 271. After considering these three proposals, Allotte de la Fuÿe concluded '... nous permettant d'enregistrer un nouvel Auguste.'

Sadly this confidence was not to last. The landowner offered the coin to the Cabinet des Medailles in Paris at an unrealistic price (8000 gold francs) which was refused (Allotte de la Fuÿe 1930: 7; Laffranchi 1942: 20). The coin lapsed into obscurity, being given to the local museum, the Musée Dobrée in Nantes, in 1929 (Estiot & Salaün

2004: 202-5). It subsequently proved hard to locate, and as recently as 1992 a scholar remarked that *'A disquieting but unavoidable suspicion is that with the exception of the finders and owner... no one since 1901 has examined the coin itself'* (Okamura 1992: 108).

This left only a plaster cast to publish as testament to the coin's existence throughout the twentieth century (e.g. *RIC* Vol. 2 pl. XX, no. 12 – first published in 1933). It was most damagingly declared a fake by the influential Italian numismatist Lodovico Laffranchi (Laffranchi 1942). From his observation of the cast (but not the actual coin), his charge was that it was a common ancient coin of Tetricus with reverse *Hilaritas Augg* (*RIC* 79; *AGK* 4a) that had been what is known as 'retooled' to create a new type. The Domitianus bust looks similar to those of the early Tetricus issues, while the name TETRICVS, he proposed, had been abraded down and re-engraved DOMITIANVS. The Hilaritas reverse had been likewise treated in Laffranchi's opinion (i.e. adapting the legend and changing Hilaritas's palm-branch into a libation bowl) to leave a *Concordia Militum* type otherwise unparalleled in the Gallic emperors' repertoire (Laffranchi 1942: 21-2). Earlier Domitianus-doubters had pointed out the unusual lack of *praenomen* and *nomen* on what should have been an inaugural issue – most emperors introduce themselves with their full name on at least their first issue (Okamura 1992: 106). For example, on his early coins Victorinus is M [for Marcus] PIAVVONIVS VICTORINVS; a name found repeated on the mosaic floor of his house in Trier when he was still tribune of Postumus's Praetorian Guard but with abbreviated spelling of ... PIAONIVS... (For a picture of the mosaic inscription see Scarre 1995: 176; Demandt & Engemann 2007: 406).

Domitianus was omitted by Drinkwater (1987), the main modern authority on the Gallic Empire in English, yet despite its detractors, the coin was never quite dismissed (hence the fact that there was an entry at all in the 1971 *Prosopography*). Early on, the prominent German numismatist Richard Delbrück had accepted the coin (but placed its date of minting as AD 273 – Delbrück 1940: 141). More recently, in 1997, the authenticity of the coin has been championed by Marcus Weder (who also highlighted its omission from *AGK*) and by Sylviane Estiot and Gildas Salaün in 2004. They were able to make use of the breakthrough of the confirmation of the coin's existence at the Musée Dobrée (via J. Lafaurie in 1996) and its subsequent transfer to the Paris Cabinet des Médailles for conservation and examination.

Cleaning revealed that the legend was embedded in ancient corrosion products making Laffranchi's proposed retooling (deduced from the cast alone) impossible (Estiot & Salaün 2004: 211-2) (Figure 3). It was also more apparent that Domitianus was given slightly different features from either Victorinus or Tetricus (Estiot & Salaün 2004: 207). Domitianus does however follow the hirsute fashion of the time and the cuirassed bust was similar to those used on issues of the second of the two mints attributed to Victorinus and Tetricus.

Comparison between the Cléons coin (*RIC* Vol. 2, pl. 20, no. 12) and the Chalgrove II coin shows that they are die-identical, and such a match puts the authenticity of the coins beyond all doubt. History now had a new Roman emperor to add to the role-call.



Figure 3. *The Cléons Domitian II coin* (photograph © Bibliothèque Nationale de France).

Conclusion

After a century of uncertainty the matching of the Cléons and Chalgrove II Domitianus coins allow us to list seven Gallic Emperors (including the Caesar Tetricus II):

- Postumus (AD 260-9)
- Laelian (AD 269)
- Marius (AD 269)
- Victorinus (AD 269-71)
- Domitian II (AD 271)
- Tetricus I and II (AD 271-4)

Domitianus the ‘Tyrant’ (as he would have been called) went unrecorded by ancient historians. So even if he was the same Domitianus mentioned in the *SHA* and he had somehow crossed the Alps following his commander’s defection to the Gallic cause in AD 268, this was never revealed (see Estiot & Salaün 2004: 214-7 for a discussion of the possibilities). As such we must treat his reign as more fleeting than either Laelian, who spent most of his few months of office besieged at Mainz, or Marius whose reign seems just as short. Both these ephemeral characters were historically recorded, unlike Domitianus whose coinage is furthermore infinitely rarer than any other Gallic emperor. From this we can deduce that his reign was no more than a momentary grasp for power about AD 271, when he was unable to establish himself against Tetricus for any longer than it took to have one set of coin dies made. As the mint for this coin’s obverse die (carrying the bust) is increasingly accepted as belonging to the city of Cologne, Domitianus was presumably on hand at the frontier for the engravers to create a new portrait type (see Mairat 2009 for further discussion of this point). His influence, however, did not appear to extend to the

principal mint – presumably he had no political sway in Trier itself. From this evidence one might deduce that Domitian II was a similar sort of character to Laelian – a rebel supported by the frontier forces but swiftly crushed by the more established figure that held the capital and commanded its *comitatus* troops (the main campaign army).

One sceptic in the 1990s thought that *‘the shade of “Domitianus”, the Gallic emperor, should be laid to rest’* (Okamura 1992: 109). Now we can resurrect this ghost to take his rightful place in the history books of the twenty-first century.

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Abbreviations

- AGK *Die Antoninianprägung der Gallischen Kaiser von Postumus bis Tetricus* (H.-J. Schulzki) (Bonn 1996)
 RIC *The Roman Imperial Coinage* (10 volumes, various editors) (London, 1923-94)
 SHA *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* (trans. by David Magie: Loeb Classical Library 263)

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