
KUNST HISTORISCHES MUSEUM WIEN



NOVEMBER 12, 2019
TO OCTOBER 4, 2020

EVIL EMPERORS AN EXHIBITION IN THE COIN COLLECTION

The image of Roman emperors transmitted by classical tradition continues to influence how we see and judge them today. Our view of Roman emperors is strongly affected by how classical tradition depicts them – Caligula, Nero or Commodus, for instance, are poster-boys for megalomania. For posterity is the final arbiter of a ruler's life and deeds, deeming them benign or evil regardless of his assertions and efforts.

Most of the authors whose works have come down to us were members of the Senate, or at least belonged to Rome's intellectual and economic elite. Some were part of the emperor's inner circle, others had joined the political opposition and may even have had cause to fear for their lives. This means that their appraisals are anything but objective; often they recount mere hearsay or rumours, or focus more on individual events than on the overall picture.

Compared to these tendentious, at times circumlocutory literary recollections, coinage appears much more sober, business-like,

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and almost cold. Throughout and after the end of classical antiquity, the images and inscriptions on coins functioned as the most important medium of (imperial) self-display. Devised by the emperor or his closest advisors, they cleverly helped to present the ruler in the best possible light.

The exhibition confronts statements and appraisals from classical antiquity – some of them contemporary, some written down several generations after the emperor's death – with coinage. The two sources differ greatly in their origins and how they were formed and have very different aims. At times, they seem to clash and are difficult to reconcile. Although most of what we know about the history of classical antiquity is based on them, this reflects the gulf that separates personal opinions from official accounts.

The exhibition examines clichés and anecdotes and tries to illustrate them with coins selected from the holdings of the Coin Cabinet, one of the largest and most important collections in the world comprising around 600.000 objects including 90.000 Roman coins. The choice of rulers runs from murderous Caligula and Nero, the arsonist of Rome, to the persecutors of Christians, to Julian the Apostate, thus, well into the fourth century AD.

WHO WERE THE "EVIL EMPERORS"?

Caius Caesar Germanicus (better known as Caligula) or Nero were undoubtedly tyrants and frequently ordered someone killed on a whim. But it seems Caligula also commissioned the rebuilding of many derelict temples, and the biographer Suetonius writes: "so much for Prince Caligula, but now I must speak of a monster." In addition to countless other failings, Caligula was accused of having incestuous relationships with his sisters. We know that he had coins struck in their name (Fig. 1), which apparently depict them as the personifications of *Securitas*, *Concordia* and *Fortuna*; he also struck coins bearing the portraits of other family members and ancestors.

Until today, Nero is primarily remembered for the great Fire of Rome, seizing Christians as scapegoats and sending them to die in the arena. From today's point of view, however, his crisis management of the conflagration was exemplary (Fig. 2).

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Some emperors were deified after they died – this was called *consecratio* – and coins were frequently struck in their honour (Fig. 3), especially when their successor was a relative and availed himself of this opportunity to proclaim his divine ancestry. But sometimes a ruler's memory was condemned (*damnatio memoriae*), which occasionally led to the destruction of his monuments, the erasure of his name from inscriptions, and in rare cases even the disfigurement of his portrait on coins (Fig. 4).

The *Historia Augusta* (Augustan History), however, reminds us that “there is no emperor who is not tainted with some grievous rumour”. Marcus Aurelius, for example, who is generally lauded as an exemplary ruler, was accused of having poisoned his adoptive brother and co-emperor Lucius Verus (Fig. 3).

Soon after the death of Marcus Aurelius, his son Commodus ended the Macromannic Wars. Contemporary Rome condemned this as a cowardly capitulation but today we would judge it an example of wise and far-sighted diplomacy. Later Commodus began regarding himself as the reincarnation of Hercules and re-founded Rome as *Colonia Commodiana* (Fig. 5). Like Caligula and Nero before him he, too, was eventually assassinated.

Now Constantine – known as the Great – is celebrated as the “Christian emperor”. However, he had initially chosen Sol, the sun god, as his personal divine patron (Fig. 6). Today, we would describe the way he ascended to the throne of the Roman Empire as a coup. Although he had initially entered into alliances with various co-rulers, to which their common coinage bears witness, he eventually went to war against all of them, defeating them and having them assassinated – and most of them are much maligned in the majority of extant written sources. For instance, Constantine and Maxentius, who ruled Rome and Italia, depicted each other on the coins they struck (Figs. 7 and 8) before Constantine defeated his adversary in the famous Battle of the Milvian Bridge.

Despite being an adherent of traditional Roman religious practices, Emperor Julian III was tolerant towards Christians. Appraisals of his rule reflect the religious affiliation of the authors writing about him, with some praising him and his reign and others denouncing him as the Apostate. A highly-cultured man-of-letters, he sported a so-called philosopher's beard, which sets him

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apart from his predecessors and makes it easy to identify his coin portraits from theirs (Fig. 9). Nonetheless, he was also a capable and popular general, presumably aided by his reputation for modesty and frugality: shortly after his arrival at the palace of Constantinopolis he was said to have been shocked by a hairdresser's affected behaviour and exorbitant income, sacking both the barber and countless other courtiers and flunkies.

INTERACTIVE USER EXPERIENCE

Visitors can study all the artefacts on show using an **interactive stele** that provides detailed information and allows them to view the coins' obverse and reverse, as well as to enlarge them. In addition, a number of **3D-enlargements** of selected coin portraits will also be on show, which, unlike the originals, can be touched, offering a novel experience not only to visually-impaired visitors.

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PRESS PHOTOGRAPHS

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Fig. 1

Caligula (Caius Caesar Germanicus)

Obverse: Bust of Caligula

Reverse: Caligula's sisters, Agrippina, Drusilla and Iulia (presumably as *Securitas*, *Concordia* and *Fortuna*)

Sestertius (brass), struck in Rome in AD 37–38

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Fig. 2

Nero

Obverse: Bust of Nero

Reverse: Temple of Vesta

(presumably destroyed in the Great Fire of Rome and rebuilt)

Aureus (gold), struck in Rome in AD 65–66

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Fig. 3

Divus Lucius Verus

Obverse: Bust of the deceased Lucius Verus

Reverse: Funerary pyre (for the cremation of the body of Lucius Verus)

Sestertius (brass), struck in Rome in AD 169 by Marcus Aurelius

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Fig. 4

Commodus

Obverse: Bust of Commodus (erased)

Reverse: Personification of Pergamum and Heros of Ephesus

Medaillon (base metal), struck in Pergamum in AD 180–182
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Fig. 5

Commodus

Obverse: Bust of Commodus wearing Hercules' lion skin

Reverse: Commodus as Hercules at the ritual re-founding of Rome

Aureus (gold), struck in Rome in AD 192

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Fig. 6

Constantine the Great

Obverse: Bust of Constantine

Reverse: Bust of Sol (the emperor's invincible companion)

Follis (base metal), struck in Trier in AD 310–313

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Fig. 7

Maxentius and Constantine

Obverse: Bust of Maxentius

Reverse: Temple of Roma, her statue visible inside the temple

Folles (base metal), struck in Rome by Maxentius in AD 307

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Fig. 8

Maxentius and Constantine

Obverse: Bust of Constantine

Reverse: Temple of Roma, her statue visible inside the temple

Folles (base metal), struck in Rome by Maxentius in AD 307

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Fig. 9

Julian III. *Apostata* (the Apostate)

Obverse: Bust of Julian III

Reverse: Bull

Double maiorina (base metal),
struck in Constantinopolis in AD 362–363

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OPENING HOURS AND ENTRANCE FEES

Kunsthistorisches Museum	Adults	€ 16
Maria-Theresien-Platz	Concessions	€ 12
1010 Vienna	Vienna City Card	€ 15
	Groups (of 10 or over)	€ 12
	Annual Ticket	€ 44
	Annual Ticket under 25	€ 25
Tue–Sun, 10am – 6pm	Children and teens under 19	free

In the summer months June, July and August the museum is **open daily**.

Online tickets are available at <https://shop.khm.at/en/tickets/>

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