1 Introduction

After the murder of the emperor Pertinax in AD 193, Septimius Severus was proclaimed ruler of the Roman Empire. The rise to power of this Pannonian military commander, who had been born in Lepcis Magna in North Africa, heralded the beginning of a dynasty that would last until AD 235. In AD 194, a year after Severus assumed power, a coin was struck for the new emperor showing Liber Pater and Hercules with the accompanying legend *DIS AVSPICIB* ('under divine auspices', Figure 1).[1]

The character of imperial rule for the next forty-one years had been announced: the Severan emperors would rule with the support of deities whose cultic centres lay both in Rome and in the provinces of the empire. The marked Lepcitanian imagery of this coin type (Liber Pater paired with Hercules) marks the beginning of an era in which local provincial cults would come to have a close association with the princeps. Septimius Severus and the succeeding members of the Severan dynasty would all emphasise a special connection with the divine. The form this connection took was unique to each emperor and his particular circumstances, a reflection of the potential for each emperor to shape his own image within wider imperial ideology.

The visual expression of one's *patria* (native city) was not unusual. Republican moneyers had often placed specific deities on their coinage as an expression of their identity and heritage. For example, Roman monetary officials (*monetales*) from Tusculum displayed imagery recalling the regional cult of the Dioscuri and those from Lanuvium placed the local goddess Juno Sospita on their coinage.[2] This practice continued under the empire: Spanish-born Trajan and Hadrian included images of the local cult of Hercules Gaditanus on their coinage.[3] Juno Sospita appears on the coinage of the Lanuvium-born Antoninus Pius.[4] Clodius Albinus had the Hadrumentine

[1] *RIC* IV.1 *Septimius Severus* 25, 31, 661, 666, 669. [2] Crawford 307/1, 412/1.
[3] *RIC* II *Trajan* 49–51; *BMCRE* III *Trajan* lxvii–lxviii, 56–9, 81–93, 1058–9; *RIC* II *Hadrian* 56–8, 125. On the temple of Hercules Gaditanus in Spain see Mierse 2004: 545–75.
[4] *RIC* III *Antoninus Pius* 608; *BMCRE* IV *Antoninus Pius* p. 210*.

Figure 1: Aureus of Septimius Severus with Liber Pater and Hercules and the legend DIS AVSPICIB TR P II COS II P P.

deity Baal Hammon displayed on his coinage.[5] The existence of this practice under the Severans can thus be seen as the continuation of a wider tradition.

The Severan dynasty forms a period of transition between the ideology of virtue that characterised emperors who ruled the 'Golden Age' of the second century, and the divine *comes* or companions increasingly associated with rulers from the second half of the third century.[6] The shift in the articulation of the emperor's power during these periods is best illustrated by a comparison of the reverse types of each emperor's coinage. Whether the emperor was responsible for the images on his coinage or not (an issue discussed in the following chapter), coin types nonetheless reflect the ideology of rule in a particular period. Unlike modern day coinage, the images which graced the reverse or 'tails' of an emperor's coinage changed to reflect current ideologies and situations, forming part of a wider monumental dialogue. But while an imperial arch or sculptural monument may have been erected in Rome every few years (if that), imperial coinage was issued by the mint *several times a year*. In a large number of instances these coins are dated to a specific year, or even to a period of a few months. This allows the historian to place the imagery within specific political, martial or social contexts, and allows us to trace the shifting emphases of ideology over the course of a year, or over several years. The information offered by numismatic evidence can thus provide a more nuanced picture than that provided by other media.

[5] *RIC* II *Hadrian* 10 (where the figure is identified as Saeculum Frugiferum); Birley 1988: 169; Xella 1991: 177.

[6] The expression *comes* first appears under Commodus, but becomes more frequent from the reign of Gallienus. See Nock 1972: 653–75, and de Blois 2006: 274–5.

That the Roman mint consistently released coinage bearing official imagery several times a year, every year, means that coinage forms an ideal medium to study the image of the princeps from a long-term perspective. Few other sources offer such research possibilities: the same genre (coinage) was utilised again and again under each emperor (however short-lived), and the record of these coins in the present day is impressive (one may say it is almost complete). Textual evidence carries with it the inevitable perspectives of individual authors, and its survival rate is patchy at best. Epigraphic evidence comes closer to the numismatic record in terms of quantity, but the damage suffered by many inscriptions leaves us reliant on restorations and speculations in many cases. Papyrological evidence is inevitably weighted towards those areas where it is best preserved, like Egypt. And here the extremely good survival rate of numismatic material must be emphasised – coins buried in hoards, deposited in votive contexts or in other contexts survive in enormous numbers in the present day. Even emperors who suffered *damnatio memoriae* are well represented within the numismatic record, offering a rare glimpse of the public image of these rulers before it was intentionally obliterated. Numismatic evidence survives in bulk, and its potential has yet to be fully exploited.

Alongside the imperial coinage issued under the authority of the emperor, smaller cities in the east of the empire produced their own coinages, albeit on a more sporadic basis. But here the numismatic evidence offers a glimpse of the cultures, ideologies and festivals of smaller cities as they negotiated their place in the changing Roman empire. In many instances coins remain our only evidence for the celebration of civic festivals and the adoption of emperor cults or *neokoroi*. Provincial coinage also offers a glimpse into how the public face of the emperor was negotiated at a local level. With provincial coinage we also have the possibility of studying a single medium (coinage) across a wide geographical and chronological time span.

The enormous scale on which Roman imperial coinage was produced and the large quantities that survive to the modern day enable us to undertake something rarely possible with other ancient media: a quantification of ideology. Within the discipline of ancient history, a single coin type is often cited as evidence for a particular event or ideology. But rarely do we pause to consider just how common this coin was in antiquity, and how many people might actually have seen it. Different coin types (and their associated imagery) were produced in different quantities in the ancient world, and before we can discuss the impact of a particular image we need to know whether this imagery flooded the marketplace, or whether it was specifically designed and produced in small numbers to be given as gifts to elite groups.

What coin types were common in each year, and why? Although a particular coin might be relevant to a particular historical event, this coin was just one amongst thousands circulating throughout the Roman world. In view of this broader context, we should consider what image was conveyed by an emperor's coinage in its *entirety*: what general impression would users have obtained from the coins they received? Here the reading of the numismatic evidence (in its entirety) in conjunction with other textual and archaeological sources can lead us to new conclusions. Why was a coin type discontinued, or why did it suddenly become less popular? Can we trace a shift in coin imagery between emperors, and what does this suggest about the changing public image of the Roman ruler? We can begin to answer these questions by examining numismatic iconography from a quantitative perspective.

Quantification, identifying in what numbers different numismatic types were produced, provides us with a more nuanced perspective of the imperial image, and offers the opportunity for long-term comparisons.[7] Such a perspective is not yet offered by most numismatic handbooks, which list coin types with little regard for (or an inaccurate representation of) quantity. Consequently, the impression gained from flicking through the pages of the *Roman Imperial Coinage* can be very different to the reality of imagery and ideology in the empire.

The potential of numismatic evidence for the study of ancient history can only be realised if the material is reintegrated into the discipline and the wider material culture of the Roman empire.[8] Too often numismatic imagery is used to 'illustrate' a historical work (for example by supplying a nice image of an otherwise obscure emperor) without its true informative potential being acknowledged, or the wider context of its production mentioned (just how common *was* this image?). Likewise numismatic works are often somewhat removed from the wider material culture of the Roman empire. This book seeks to overcome many of these barriers, and demonstrates what can be achieved if coinage, viewed as a whole, is studied in conjunction with the textual and archaeological data available.

The Romans themselves viewed coinage as a communicative tool, similar to arches, imperial letters and other monumental architecture. This is clearly demonstrated by the imperial practice of 'audience targeting': the production of a particular coin series, with a particular message, sent to a particular

[7] Already highlighted by Noreña 2001: 146–68.
[8] A similar problem is encountered in the separation of numismatics from archaeology. See Kemmers and Myrberg 2011: 97–108.

audience (for example, coins bearing ideologies of military prowess and victory were sent to Roman camps, and coins advertising the benefits of Pax sent to civilian settlements).[9] As one of many imperial communicative tools, numismatic evidence can inform sculptural and architectural remains, and wider material culture can clarify numismatic imagery.

The reason that coins survive in such quantity and provide such a full record is that often coins were buried in hoards that remained hidden until the modern day. Buried at a particular moment in time, these hoards provide a glimpse of coin circulation at a particular period, and allow us to gauge how frequent different coin types actually were. A coin type that occurs only once in a hoard in Britain, for example, must be treated very differently to a coin type that is found in quantity in hoards all over the empire. By examining these hoards as evidence, we can see which images were employed more frequently than others, and we can begin to gain a better idea of the *overall* numismatic image produced by an emperor. Then we can contextualise this through comparison with other emperors, and gradually long- and short-term shifts in imperial ideology can be identified. This approach is discussed more fully in the following chapter.

We return to the statement that the Severan dynasty saw a shift in ideology from the 'Golden Age' of the Antonines to a dynasty based more on the idea of divine support. This shift can be identified through a quantitative comparison of the reverse types employed by the imperial mint. For a quick demonstration, the Reka-Devnia coin hoard forms an excellent sample. Buried some time after AD 251 in Marcianopolis (modern day Bulgaria), the hoard contains more than 80,000 silver coins from a variety of emperors.[10] Using the Reka-Devnia hoard we can trace changes in the representation of the emperor on Roman currency. For Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, personifications and virtues constitute a substantial part of the emperor's reverse types (52%, 61%, 67%, 56% and 60% respectively, Appendix 1, Figures 85–9). These

[9] The best demonstration of this is Kemmers 2006.

[10] The Reka-Devnia hoard provides a large sample that largely reflects the composition of other hoards. This can be illustrated by an overview of the coinage of the Severan dynasty. The composition of Severan coinage as it is found in the Reka-Devnia hoard compares favourably to the composition of other hoards of smaller size. For example, 18% of the reverse types of Septimius Severus' silver coinage in the Reka-Devnia hoard display deities, 25% portray military themes, 39% personifications and virtues, while 13% display other images. Smaller hoards consulted in the course of this research suggest 22% of Severus' reverse types displayed images of deities, 25% had military themes, 33% portrayed personifications and virtues and 20% displayed other types. A similarly rough correlation can also be seen for the other Severan emperors. The date of the hoard is given by the coins of Decius found in the sample, though Metcalf 2002: 145–50 suggests a more accurate date may be the reign of Gordian III.

types communicate the idea of a virtuous ruler whose reign brought manifold blessings to Rome and the empire. By contrast, deities had a smaller role in the emperor's numismatic image, constituting 12%, 4%, 13%, 16% and 19% respectively (Appendix 1, Figures 85–9). If we compare these ratios to those present under the Severan emperors, we can see a greater emphasis on the divine, perhaps already heralded on Commodus' coinage. Indeed, Commodus' public image may be better understood within the context of the Severan period. Deities constitute 18% of Severus' silver reverse types, 73% of Caracalla's types while he was sole emperor, 36% of Elagabalus' types and 34% of the silver coinage of Severus Alexander (Appendix 1, Figures 90–3). Through this quick comparison we can quantify the shifting ideology associated with the emperor on coinage: the power wielded by the princeps was increasingly expressed in terms of divine support and divine sanction.[11] This is not to suggest that the divine played no role in the articulation of power in the second century, or that virtues had no role in the third. But the results suggest a development in imperial ideology, in the ways in which virtues and deities were used in the construction of the image of the emperor and his power. The large proportion of personifications under Elagabalus and Severus Alexander highlights the fact that imperial virtues retained a central role in the conceptualisation of the emperor in the Severan period, but the large proportion of types relating to the divine highlights changes to the dialogue of power.

The second half of the third century following the death of Severus Alexander sees a sharper definition of this divine support. Though we should not classify this as a simple linear development, coinage in this period increasingly casts deities as the companions or *comites* of the emperor.[12] Fears' study of this phenomenon has suggested that the Persian threat (particularly the capture of Valerian by the Persians in AD 260), in conjunction with the failure of emperors in the later third century to establish a dynasty, meant that divine election and divine support became key in the legitimisation of power.[13] The use of the divine in the Severan period can be seen as a precursor to the more clearly articulated relationship between the emperor and the gods in late antiquity. Septimius Severus, like many emperors in the later third century, came to power through war and thus could not claim an ancestral right to the throne. The strong assertion of divine support under Severus and his successors was a reaction to this circumstance, and is a key phase in the development of imperial ideology.

[11] This conclusion is similar to that reached by Manders 2008: 35–6.
[12] de Blois 2006: 274; Hedlund 2008: 213; Nock 1972: 653–75; Possenti 1995: 141–70; Turcan 1978: 1022–5.
[13] Fears 1977: 279–305.

2 Contextualising a 'foreign' dynasty

> My belief that his origin mattered has led me to call the story of his life *The African Emperor*.[1]

The title of Birley's biography of Septimius Severus highlights an ever-present factor in many modern studies of the Severan emperors: their provincial origins. The provincial origins of this dynasty, particularly Septimius Severus, have shaped modern ideas about Severan culture, Severan politics and Severan religion.[2] Much of this discourse tells us more about the modern colonial and postcolonial worlds than about the Roman empire in the third century. The modern political and cultural contexts that have informed our ideas surrounding the identity of one Severan emperor, Septimius Severus, are detailed below. This is followed by an introduction to the ancient material of the Severan period and the ways in which it can be approached.

Interest in the cultural identities of the Severan emperors has not remained confined to the academic world. In 1963 a member of the US Congress mentioned the origins of Septimius Severus during a debate on the capacity of various countries containing 'African' populations (Haiti, Liberia and Ethiopia) for self-government.

> Mr. Speaker, I must take issue with a colleague of mine in the 88th Congress in the statement attributed to him that the Africans had never shown any ability to build and govern. I would suggest to him that when his ancestors and my ancestors may have been wandering around in the darkness, reaching out for a better life, that an African was Emperor of Rome and according to John Gunther[3] was of Negro blood.[4]

Congressman O'Hara's comments on this occasion sent the opposing party scuttling towards their history books in an attempt to defend their beleaguered colleague. Two weeks later came the declaration that there was

[1] Birley 1988: xi. [2] For example, Hammond 1940: 137–73 and Haywood 1940: 175–85.
[3] John Gunther was a journalist and author of popular books, notably an *Inside* series of continental surveys.
[4] Comments of Mr O'Hara of Illinois, *Proceedings of the 88th Congress of the United States of America*, page 11,498.

'no indication that he [Severus] was a black man', and Gibbon was triumphantly produced to show that Septimius, in any case, was a poor ruler.[5] This strange chapter in US politics highlights the fact that questions of identity in the ancient world remain loaded with modern concerns.[6] More than fifty years after this incident the election of Barack Obama to the US presidency revived the 'African' debate surrounding Septimius Severus after an eminent classicist drew a parallel between the two.[7] The release of the song '*Barack Obama Is Septimius Severus: Change You Can Believe In*' by the Ghanian artist Heru once again casts Septimius as a 'black' emperor of Rome.

During a trip to Italy in 2009, the Libyan leader Muammar Al-Gaddafi took advantage of his presence in Rome to claim descent from Severus, the 'Libyan' emperor.[8] Gaddafi's statement takes on a particular irony when one considers the relationship between Italy and Libya in the modern era. During the Italian occupation of Tripoli, archaeology and Roman history played an important ideological role, highlighting the connectedness of the two regions. The excavation (or 'liberation') of the archaeological remains of the area, particularly the city of Lepcis Magna, was one of many ways in which the Italians sought to bring their new conquest under control. In a 1926 work detailing to the Italian people the work done in Tripolitania under the Governor Count Volpi, archaeological excavations are summarised under the larger heading *La Conquista Morale*.[9] As part of the renovation of the Piazza Castello area (a region that formed the civic and cultural centre of Italian Tripolitania), a bronze statue of Septimius Severus was erected at the entrance to the old city, a reminder of Italy and Libya's common heritage and Rome's imperial mission.[10] This statue is now placed at the entrance to the archaeological area of Lepcis Magna, and features on postcards.[11] The statue also features in the political pieces of the Libyan cartoonist

[5] Comments of Mr Waggonner of Louisiana, *Proceedings of the 88th Congress of the United States of America*, page 12,198, quoting Gibbon: 'He promised only to betray; he flattered only to ruin; and however he might occasionally bind himself by oaths and treaties, his conscience, obsequious to his interest, always released him from inconvenient obligation.'

[6] The same postcolonial climate has given rise to other Afrocentric ideas about the ancient world, notably Bernal 1987–2006, and the debate *Black Athena* has created. On this see Bernal 2001; Howe 1999; Keita 2000: 337–45; Lefkowitz 1996; and Lefkowitz and Maclean Rogers 1996.

[7] www.timesonline.typepad.com/dons_life/2008/11/barack-obama–.html.

[8] www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/8098681.stm.

[9] Piccioli 1926: 337–52. The work comments that Lepcis Magna is distinguished above all other African cities by a single event: the birth of the 'grande Imperatore romano: Settimio Severo' (p. 345). Severus is described as a 'barbarico' (p. 345) and 'bruno' (p. 346).

[10] von Henneberg 1994: 141. [11] Munzi 2001: 129.

Muhammad az-Zwâwî: in one such piece Severus writes on the base of his statue 'I am an Arab and a Muslim.'[12]

The French occupation of Algeria also led to interest in Roman North Africa. Having connected their own origins to ancient Rome, the French saw themselves as saving and reclaiming a lost past, and believed themselves to be the 'rightful' owners of the region.[13] But while scholars in the colonial world stressed the 'Africanity' of Severus, those in the postcolonial world were more reluctant.[14] A notable example here is Marcel Benabou, an African scholar who reacted against French dominated scholarship by suggesting that people in Africa led a passive resistance to Roman conquest through local culture. In his *La résistance africaine à la romanisation*, Benabou argued that Septimius did not possess any African patriotism or partiality.[15]

In modern scholarship Septimius' African origins have been seen as a motivating force for the embellishment of Lepcis Magna, Carthage and other parts of Africa, as a reason behind an 'African' faction of politicians under his reign, and as a factor behind several of his building projects, notably the Septizodium.[16] However the area in which this perceived expression of non-Roman identity was considered especially prominent was in the religion of Severus and his successors.

> The elevation of the provincial Septimius Severus of Libyan birth to the imperial power brought to the fore a dynasty of non-Italians who wrought considerable changes in the facade of the principate by encouraging the development of customs drawn from their African and Oriental ancestry and experience. Nowhere is the change more marked than in the dynasty's religious proclivities.[17]

There is no denying the provincial origins of these emperors, yet examinations of their religious activities have lacked historical context and have been largely piecemeal. The last published monograph exploring religion during

[12] Munzi 2001: 130. [13] Lorcin 2002: 295–329.

[14] Reinforcing the idea that terms like 'Orientalism' formed a mechanism of cultural domination (Ghazoul 2004: 123–7). The idea of Severus as a 'traitor' to his own culture is also apparent in Heru's lyrics: 'Severus we had high hopes for you, every African man, woman and baby, but you became the metaphor of a weeping willow tree so shady, you went along with their brutality, you went along with their insanity, and disregard for non-Roman humanity, you rejected your own history, and adopted a Roman identity.'

[15] Benabou 1976: 166. For a discussion of the context of Benabou's work see Mattingly 1996: 49–69.

[16] Embellishment of Lepcis Magna: Babelon 1903: 157–74; Haywood 1940: 177. African politicians: Birley 1969: 271–80; Birley 1988: xi; Lo Cascio 2005: 137 (against which Barnes 1967: 87–107). Septizodium: Palmer 1978: 1117; Thomas 2007: 334.

[17] Palmer 1978: 1085–6.

the entire Severan dynasty (from Septimius to Severus Alexander) was published by the French Protestant theologian Jean Réville in 1886, entitled *La religion à Rome sous les Sévères*. Réville was the son of Albert Réville, founding president of the religious studies section in the École des hautes études at the Sorbonne, where Jean would later go on to become professor of patristic literature. The section was founded in the hope of pursuing *sciences religieuses*, a combination of science and theology pioneered by F. M. Müller and C. P. Tiele.[18] Strict, 'scientific' procedures were employed to search for evidence of a natural human religion, a concept connected to theological concerns of French Protestantism at the time. Mankind was believed to possess a 'natural', primordial monotheistic revelation that was lost after the fall from Paradise.[19] Jean Réville, like his father, believed strongly in this concept, arguing that mankind had an innate religious mental faculty that could not be quashed.[20] This has a strong bearing on his work on the Severans, whom he studied in the hope of tracing the rise of Christianity.

Réville saw a religious renaissance in third century Rome, born of man's desire and demand for religion, a renaissance that by its very existence proved man could not exist without belief.[21] In Réville's interpretation of the third century, the Romans rebelled from the skepticism of earlier periods and demanded the reinstitution of religious belief.[22] The seeming 'Neopythagorean reform' witnessed in the publication of Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, a perceived increase of 'orientalism' in Roman religion (culminating under Elagabalus), and an alleged increase in syncretism (culminating under Severus Alexander) were all believed by Réville to have contributed to a society in which paganism and Christianity became so similar that one could be mistaken for the other.[23] From this confusion, according to Réville, Christianity emerged triumphant. *La religion à Rome sous les Sévères* later influenced Cumont and other scholars working on the Severan dynasty.[24] Réville's work can only be assessed within the boundaries of nineteenth-century scholarship: its dependence on French theological debates, its belief in the inevitable rise of Christianity, and its uncritical acceptance of passages from the *Historia Augusta* mean that it can be of little use outside the realm of historiography.

[18] Strenski 2002: 161–76. [19] Strenski 2002: 157. [20] Strenski 2002: 161.
[21] Réville 1886: 18. [22] Réville 1886: 17.
[23] Réville 1886: 294. See also the review of the book, Gardner 1886: 553.
[24] Cumont 1911: 199; Scheid 1987: 312. For examples of the impact of Réville in later Severan studies see (by way of example) Hijmans 1996: 121–2; Mader 2005: 171; McCann 1968: 58; Pietrzykowski 1986: 1823; Platnauer 1965: 143 n.5; Turcan 1997: 154–5.