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SOL INVICTUS AND MITHTA
SOME EVIDENCE FROM THE MINT OF ROME

The coin type at the Mint of Rome

Throughout the first four centuries of the Empire, the Mint of Rome employed an enormous number of obverse and reverse types and legends which refer directly to contemporary historical events and offer a continuous commentary on the policy, achievements and hopes of successive emperors. As Gncchi has pointed out the Roman Imperial coinage is always the faithful mirror of the politico-religious-social history of the Roman world, registering not only its events but the evolution of its thought; and so it provides us with the most detailed information from a most authentic source. Mattingly has shown that the coinage of Rome was controlled by officials who had access, when necessary, to the highest authority — so that the types employed do indeed represent official attitudes and reflect public opinion. "The coinage provides a continuous expression of the policy of the Empire as it presented it at the bar of public opinion" concludes Mattingly. Among other topics due regard is paid to religion. Augustus commemorates Apollo, giver of victory at Actium; on the coins of Elagabalus we see the honours paid to the god of Emesa; Aurelian celebrates his divine helper Sol Dominus Imperii Romani; in his conflict with the Christian church Diocletian celebrates the Genius Populi Romani; and in his earlier years

1 F. Gncchi I Tipi Monetarii di Roma Imperiale Milan 1907 pp. vi ff.
3 BMCRE I p. cvi and p. 18 Augustus no. 95 struck by the moneyer C. Antistius Vetus.
5 RIC V part 1. p. 258 and p. 301 Aurelian nos. 319-322.
6 cfr. N.H. Baynes in CAH xii p. 663 fn. 3.
the SOLI INVICTO COMITI coinage proclaims the patron deity of Constantine.7

For the worship of Mithra, the evidence of the coin types seems prima facie to be clear, unambiguous and conclusive. In the first four centuries of the Christian era at the Mint of Rome, there is no coin type that mentions Mithra at all and none that has any distinctively Mithraic connotation. This is particularly puzzling, because while the Mint of Rome is inclined to be conservative, it does have references to and representations of other Oriental cults and their temples. Coins of Vespasian in A.D. 71 show the temple of Isis.8 Domitian, who had escaped from the Capitol in December 69 disguised as a Priest of Isis, restored the temple of Serapis after a fire and made it a coin type on his denarii of 94/6.9 In the same issue we find the temple of Cybele,10 as well as those of Jupiter and Minerva.11 Isis and Serapis do not appear commonly but do recur from time to time — for Faustina II (under Marcus Aurelius), for Septimius Severus, Postumus and finally in the reign of Julian the Apostate. Cybele recurs from time to time from the period of Hadrian up to Caracalla.12

Mithra is never represented as a coin type of the Mint of Rome even when we have explicit literary or epigraphic evidence of strong imperial interest in the cult and the admission of the emperor to its rites. The reign of Commodus (176-192) marks a major change in the religious attitude of the emperors and its image on the coinage. We see public recognition of the trends towards astral religion and the influence of Commodus’ eccentric megalomania.13 Jupiter appears on the coins as IOVI EXSUP (erantissimo) from 186,14 I.O.M. SPONSOR SEC (uritatis) AVG,15