The constitutio Antoniniana (AD 212): Taxes or Religion?

1 Introduction

The aim of this short paper is to add a numismatic argument to the discussion about the character and objective of the so-called constitutio Antoniniana, and to argue that in promulgating this edict the emperor Caracalla (211-217 AD) may be considered a forerunner of the emperor Decius (249-251 AD).

Eighteen hundred years ago, in AD 212, the emperor Antoninus, commonly called Caracalla (211-217), published an edict through which he gave Roman citizenship to all free inhabitants of the Roman empire, except so-called dediticii. A momentous measure! Nonetheless there are very few sources in which it is mentioned. In Dig. 1.5.17 Ulpian is very briefly speaking about the in orbe Romano qui sunt ex constitutione imperatoris Antonini cives Romani effecti sunt.1 And there is a fairly indeterminate sentence in Dig. 50.1.33, where a contemporary of Severus Alexander (emperor from 222 to 235), the jurist Modestinus, observes that Rome is the common patria of all. There are two other testimonia, a paragraph in Cassius Dio’s Roman History and a papyrus text.

2 Taxes or Religion

In P. Giss. 40, col. 1, lines 1-11 we read that the emperor Caracalla wished to render thanks to the gods for Geta’s so-called conspiracy to be thwarted and for himself to be saved. He wanted to render thanks to the gods together with all who were now his people, and with all others who should join his people. The result is that he gives Roman citizenship to all of those who are under his rule.2

* A short version of this paper was read at a Round Table about the constitutio Antoniniana in All Souls College, Oxford, June 15, 2012.

1 Buraselis 2007, 3, with note 4. He points out that this sentence is coming from book 22 of Ulpian’s Ad edictum praetoris.

2 P. Giss. 40, i, lines 1-11:

[Αὐτοκράτωρ Καίσαρ Μάρκος Αὐρήλιος Σεουῆρος] Ἀντωνῖνο[ς] Ἐ[ὐσεβή]ς λέγει:
The text contains quite a few lacunae, and since the publication of the text by Paul Meyer there has been a lot of discussion about it, but so much is clear.3

According to Cassius Dio 78.9.5 (Loeb edition), Caracalla had fiscal motives. Dio tells us that he made all the people in his empire Roman citizens because he wished to increase his revenues. Former non-citizens now would have to pay the old taxes that had existed before, new ones that Caracalla instituted, and taxes that only Roman citizens had been obliged to pay. Caracalla was a big spender, and needed all the money he could get. He raised the soldiers’ and officers’ pay by half, distributed luxurious handouts, instigated great works, such as his baths in Rome, doubled the 5% tax on manumission and the tax on inheritances, introduced new taxes, and demanded aurum coronarium at the occasion of largely fictitious military successes.4 A measure to increase tax returns would fit in well with all this.

Right as Dio may be, however, this does not exclude other motives. It is not absurd to think that in the text contained in P. Giss. 40, i, 1-11 Caracalla was fairly honest about his motives. The image of the emperor as it stands is largely defined by the literary sources. They only tell us, however, how they perceived Caracalla. Their image undoubtedly profoundly differs from the way in which the emperor himself wished to portray his own person and government.

3 Meyer 1920, nr 1. See Wilhelm 1934, 178-180 for the first phases of the discussion. Buraselis 2007, 5-13, 14-87, 88-93, and 120-157 thoroughly treats the contents, backgrounds, and significance of the text, and gives a complete and vivid survey of almost everything that has been said and written about it. See also his bibliography, pp. 159-164. A recently published work on the preceding imperial representation by Septimius Severus is Lichtenberger 2011. He has given a rich bibliography as well, pp. 403-451.

4 On Caracalla’s big spending, windfalls, taxes, and irregular income: Cassius Dio 78.9-10; Duncan-Jones 1994, 15-16. On the fiscal consequences of the constitutio Antoniniana, which are not very clear, see Buraselis 2007, 143-152. In his view (p. 152) the debasement of third century imperial coinage decreased the importance of the tributum capitis in cash, and increased the importance of taxation in kind, all over the empire.