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Usurping a Usurper: the Revolt of Poemenius at Trier

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*After him, Poemenius...was the man...who was chosen to protect his fellow-citizens when Trier closed its gates against Decentius Caesar.*¹

The name 'Poemenius' is not one that would be familiar to most numismatists; in fact, it would probably not be familiar to a great many ancient historians either. Yet it is through his actions that we have today one of the more interesting issues of coins to survive from the Roman Imperial period. All that remains of this consequential moment in Roman history is a solitary sentence in a partially lost work of Ammianus Marcellinus and a few rare coins lost and hoarded long ago.

The Roman Empire was once again united under Constantine I 'the Great' (AD 307–337; Fig 1), and on his death the empire was inherited by his three sons. Constantine II received control of the western areas, Constans the central parts as well as North Africa, and Constantius II the eastern regions. Constantine launched an attack on the youngest brother's adjacent territories and was soundly defeated with the elder brother perishing in the fighting.

The empire was redivided, with Constans and Constantius now ruling west and east respectively. In spite of a few successful campaigns against the Sarmatians and Franks in 341–2 and an expedition



Fig 1. Map of Principal cities.

Created by author.

to Britain in 343, Constans was seen as an ineffective ruler and ill-admired by his court, the military and his subjects alike. A combination of his fanatical and aggressive manner and his unacceptable proclivities and vices (at least one source calling them 'criminal')¹¹ led to a coup in January 350.

At the celebrations for the birthday of the son of Marcellinus, Constans' *comes rei privatae* (Count of the Private [imperial] Purse), one of Constans' generals presented himself to the gathering dressed in imperial regalia and was immediately accepted as the new emperor. This man, Magnentius, was about 47 years of age and of Germanic or perhaps British parents (his father may have been British and his mother Frankish).

He was a soldier of significant merit who rose through the ranks and was eventually elevated to commander of the Jovian and Herculean battalions (the former praetorian guards).

Constans learned of these events and fled south. He was pursued, captured and murdered, despite his taking refuge in a temple at *Castrum Helenae* (modern Elne). Magnentius was soon able to take full command of the western regions and set his sights on the rest of Constans' realm. He was resisted for a short time by Vetranio, who usurped in the area of Illyria, and Nepotian, who rebelled in Rome.

Negotiations with Constantius II failed and the last surviving son of Constantine marched west with his troops to meet the man responsible for his brother's death. He did not attack immediately, however, and in the interim two new Caesars were elevated, Constantius Gallus in the east, and Decentius, Magnentius' brother, in the west. After a number of lesser skirmishes in the summer of 351 the two armies met in a decisive battle near Mursa on September 28. More than fifty thousand troops were killed on both sides. Although Constantius lost more in number, Magnentius lost the greater percentage of his force and retreated toward Italy. En-route he was able to re-organise sufficiently to turn, near the mint city of Ticinum (modern Pavia), and defeat a small group of troops sent in pursuit. He secured his position in Gaul and northern Italy and was able to regroup and recover.

Over the next two years neither side was able to mount any great offensive, but Constantius was able to restore to legitimacy the areas of Sicily, Spain and Africa, as well as parts of Italy, each time with little resistance. In July 353 Constantius mounted

his ultimate offensive and this final battle took place at Mons Seleucus. Magnentius was defeated and cut off from most of his troops, but was still able to flee north to Lugdunum. There he was besieged by the pursuing forces of Constantius, and when he became aware of a plot to betray him to his conqueror he took his own life.

In spite of its distance from the main centres of battle to the south, the Rhine city of Treveri (*Augusta Trevirorum*—from here on referred to by its modern name, Trier) was a place of great significance during the last months and days of these events.

Decentius Caesar had most likely based himself there because Trier was the centre for Imperial administration in the west (and had been so for much of the first half of the fourth century). A series of incursions by a number of the local Germanic tribes along the Rhine frontier was mounted against Decentius, undoubtedly instigated by the agents of Constantius.

The precise sequence of events is not known, but it seems that Decentius was caused to leave the city, perhaps to defend against one of these incursions, and upon his return found that the city, under the leadership of Poemenius, had 'closed its gates' to the junior usurper. Decentius and his entourage were then forced to seek refuge elsewhere and headed west toward familiar territory around Ambianum (modern Amiens) and Lutetia (modern Paris), and then south to Agedincum.

Whilst at Agedincum news of the fates of Magnentius and the rest of his family reached Decentius and he too committed suicide. The only member of the family recorded to have survived was Magnentius' wife Justina (they had married in early 351); she later married the emperor Valentinian I,

in 368.

The revolt

The precise date of the revolt is not known. We do have the dates of certain events and with these and the use of other information we can make certain deductions to narrow the probable time-frame in which it occurred. That Poemenius successfully held Trier against Decentius until the end of the revolt is made evident by the fact that he was still alive two years later.ⁱⁱⁱ Further supporting this premise is the fact that Decentius did not re-take the city, because if he had returned, crushed this revolt and recaptured the city, then what was it that precipitated his flight from Trier? There can be little doubt that had Decentius successfully returned, Poemenius would have received the punishment afforded all rebels and been executed (which, from a passage in Ammianus Marcellinus¹, we know did not happen as Poemenius survived beyond 353 and as late as the events surrounding the revolt of Silvanus in August 355).

The end of the revolt thus coincides with the end of the reigns of Magnentius and Decentius, August 353. When did it begin? We must refer to the coinage to help us establish both when the revolt began and its duration.

The coins

JPC Kent, in the 1959 *Numismatic Chronicle*, demonstrated that two issues of coinage struck at the Trier mint, one in gold and one in bronze, related to this chaotic time.^{iv} Both bore the name of Constantius II, and were remarkably similar to certain coins of Magnentius. Perhaps more importantly, they had very little in common with any of the other coin types struck at any of the mints which were certainly under the control of Constantius



Fig 2. Constantius Gold Solidus, *RIC* Trier 329. *Numismatica Ars Classica*, Auction 25, lot # 602.

II.

Gold coins: The gold issue shows the goddess Victory with wings opened, holding palm and spear, leading a regally clad figure of Constantius who holds a globe and spear.^v The reverse legend of *VICTORIA AVGVSTI NOSTRI* has no precedent for Constantius. This exceptionally interesting reverse depiction also appears to have no prototype under Constantius, nor for any other ruler (Fig 2).

It has been suggested by some that the image portends Victory to come, by others Victory achieved. Both of these interpretations are important for the dating of the issue. It appears that Victory, whilst holding a palm and wreath (both symbols of victory/achievement), is leading Constantius toward a goal, rather than presenting him with the accoutrements following any particular triumph (such as may be seen on many other coins struck previously for earlier rulers).

Bastien^{vi} proposes that the position of the figure of Victory in relation to Constantius is indicative of victory achieved, as opposed to victory desired, and thus the issue must follow Magnentius' loss in the battle at Mons Seleucus (best dated to late July 353). For this to be feasible, news of this battle had to travel a distance of more than 600km, which would have taken a minimum of about six to seven days to traverse (if a continuous journey by fast horse, much more if by



Fig 3. Magnentius, centenionalis, *RIC* Trier 320.
CNG E-Auction 53, lot #

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foot). This has the news arriving quite some weeks after Decentius' most likely time of departure from Trier.

This does not mean that the gold issue does not have a reference to the victory. It certainly could have been struck after the news arrived at Trier and also after Decentius had already departed. The gold is clearly much rarer than the bronze, with few specimens known, and there seems little reason why the bronze coinage could not have been struck exclusively from the initial stages, only to be complemented with a celebratory gold issue a few weeks into the revolt and then both issues, or perhaps only the bronze, continuing until being specifically terminated by Constantius.

Bronze coins: At the beginning of his reign Magnentius quite expectedly issued a number of propagandaic reverse types such as those showing the goddess Victory (or Victories) or the emperor on horseback spearing a fallen enemy (following the types struck around the empire in the years before his usurpation). He then introduced a completely new reverse type for his coins, that of the large Chi-Rho symbol flanked by the Alpha and Omega (Figs 3 and 4).

The first clue as to the dating of this



Fig 4. Decentius, centenionalis, *RIC* Trier 322.
Tkalec Auktion 2003, lot #

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issue is that the coins were struck in the names of both Magnentius and Decentius. This means that they had to be struck some time after March 351, the time when Decentius was elevated to the Caesarship. The next clue is that they were struck only at the mints of Ambianum, Lugdunum, Arelate, and Trier (ie, only those mints Magnentius controlled after his devastating loss at Mursa and subsequent withdrawal into Gaul in mid 352). An issue of his regular coinage was also restricted to these mints, but included the mints of Rome and Aquileia, so the Chi-Rho group must post-date these coins and Magnentius' loss of these mints (ie, after late 352).

Pierre Bastien, in his 1964 work *Le Monnayage De Magnence*, indicated that the issue more probably dated to the earlier part of 353.^{vii} Kent disagreed slightly with this dating, but only by about a month or so, and in any case there was overall concurrence on the sequence of issues.

Whichever model is followed, it is clear that the Chi-Rho coinage is extra-ordinary for both its size and imagery. These new coins were much larger in both diameter and weight when compared to any of the preceding issues of either the usurpers or the

sons of Constantine. Just as the folles



Fig 5. Constantius II, centenionalis, *RIC* Trier 335.
Author's collection.



Fig 6. Constantius II, centenionalis, *RIC* Trier 332.
Numismatik Lanz Auktion 125, lot # 1110.

introduced under Diocletian's monetary reforms may be compared to *assaria* of the second century AD, similar comparisons may be made between this new coinage and that of the tetrarchic period.

The bronze coinage bearing Constantius II's name continued this remarkable new reverse type, but now showed a marked modification in the reverse legend. Instead of the Magnentian SALVS DD NN AVG ET CAES, referring to: 'the welfare of our lords [plural] Augustus and Caesar' (Figs 3 and 4), there is a conspicuous change to SALVS AVG NOSTRI, 'the welfare of our [singular] Augustus' (Figs 5 and 6).

Let us examine this a little further. The singular 'AVG' utilised on this new reverse cannot apply to either of the usurpers as we know that Magnentius died first and there is no record or suggestion that the Caesar Decentius took the higher title Augustus at any time. It can only be the case that the reverse must have been changed specifically for use with this obverse. Constantius II must be the Augustus referred to, a fact now obvious even without consideration of the unambiguous obverse, and thus the city's transfer of allegiance is evident on both sides of this coin issue.

Examination of all issues of Roman coinage, from its beginnings to the mid 4th

century, establishes that the reverse legends ending '...AVG NOSTRI' are restricted to a very narrow place and time, and that they are peculiar to both the reign of Magnentius and the mint of Trier. A few variations exist, but this exact construction belongs only to this mint and only to this brief time. Both this and the gold issue have this feature, and further assist us to narrow the time and place of issue.

Having placed the Chi-Rho coins in the name of Constantius with those of Magnentius, we must now ascertain where within the issue they belong. Were they struck at the start, middle or end of the overall Magnentian issue? In *RIC* VIII, Kent indicates that the weights of these pieces ought to place them between the second and third stages of Magnentius' coinage (ie, at the start of the Chi-Rho issues, late 352 to early 353). This is apparently in contradiction with his statement in *NC* relating to the Trier mint, that 'its revolt cannot therefore have taken place until shortly before the final campaign of Constantius against Magnentius in the Summer of 353' and then, in relation to the coins, 'the average weight of the bronzes would place

them somewhere in the middle of the *Salus solidi* of Trier later than any of the bronzes.'

In connecting the coins to the revolt it is difficult to see, therefore, how there can be a revolt without coins, and then coins without a revolt.

What we have, in fact, is two denominations for both the issues in the name of Magnentius and Constantius. Taken as a contiguous whole the average weights are skewed, but when separated, we see a distinct pattern of decline with both denominations of the Magnentian issues, and then a continuation of that decline within both denominations in the name of Constantius. A similar pattern is observable in the diameters of each issue. The largest and heaviest pieces bear the names of both Magnentius and Decentius, and the smallest and lightest pieces bear the name of Constantius II.

Following Bastien's arrangement, the earliest coins of Magnentius have an average weight of between about 5.07gm and 5.26gm, and are similar to those struck by Constantius within his own borders. They subsequently decline to about 4.59gm and then a little further to about 4.21gm. Suddenly there is a great leap to an average of over 8.33gm (some specimens being well over 10gm) with the introduction of the Chi-Rho pieces.

These spectacular new coins may have been introduced as a measure to garner support with the populace following his disastrous losses and subsequent withdrawal from Italy. They may have been issued as an attempt at remonetisation to build confidence in his western economy. How better to gain the public trust with a completely new coin issue, than to make it much bigger, heavier and bolder? The coins of his opponent remained smaller, lighter and far less impressive.

This new issue was clearly meant to

have an impact, both symbolically and economically. However, it was an impact that could not be sustained and, probably for inflationary or economic reasons, the average weight of this new coinage soon declined to about 6.67gm whilst retaining its fiduciary value.

This pattern of high initial weight and subsequent reduction is also observable at mints other than Trier and the rapidity of such reduction may, in this instance, sufficiently explain the scarcity of the largest of these issues.

The smaller denomination is around 4.46gm, or a little over half the weight of the larger pieces, and those struck in the name of Constantius weigh an average of about 6.00gm and 2.75gm respectively (the latter suffers from a rather small sample size; Fig 7).

This evidence clearly draws us to the conclusion that the Chi-Rho coins in the name of Constantius were issued after those in the names of Magnentius and Decentius. This gives us an indication as to the placement of the coins, but not necessarily to the date of the revolt. We need to examine other evidence. None of the surviving written sources offer any date for Poemenius' revolt, and much that may once have existed has been lost to us, so we must rely on information from other sources. Likewise, the archaeological evidence concerning these events is also almost non-existent, so we have to draw on the few things we do have.

A further reading of Ammianus tells us simply that Decentius lost Trier, without stating a date, and we are told from other sources that both usurpers were dead by 18 August. We must bear in mind the amount of time it would have taken for a fleeing

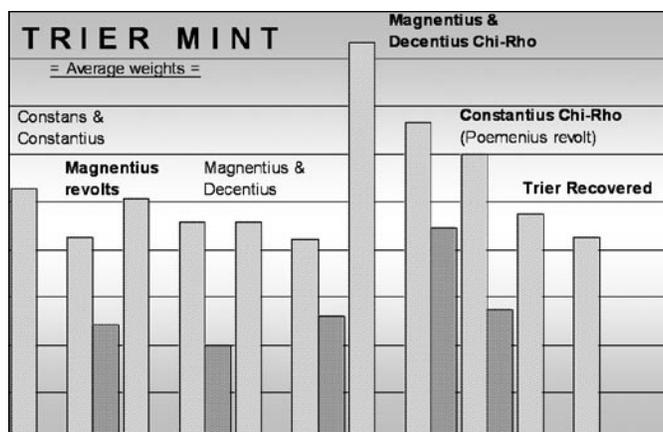


Fig 7. Table of weights.^{viii}

Decentius to travel from Trier to Ambianum, and then onto Agedincum. We know he was in Agedincum at the time of his death, giving us a date from which to work backwards.

To traverse the approximate distances involved, over 300 kilometres and then over 200 kilometres, it would take a minimum of about two weeks. It took a messenger about seven days to reach Agedincum from Lugdunum with news of the death of Magnentius, a distance of about 300 kilometres. Expanding on that to take into account the greater distances, and taking into consideration the fact that Decentius was travelling with his court and entourage, a period of about four to six weeks is more likely. This places his expulsion from Trier to the first half of July, and perhaps as early as the last week of June.

These bronze Constantian pieces are rare, but not excessively so, suggesting the period of issue was quite short in duration, but long enough for a number of obverse and reverse dies to be produced, apparently with three quite distinctive styles of portraiture.^{ix} The period of production must therefore have been several weeks rather than just a

few days, but certainly less than several months. This fits well with the time period suggested.

We must also take into account the time it would likely have taken for Constantius to send, from his position in Lugdunum, orders to terminate production of this offensive coinage. Bastien stated in his 1964 work, that the Chi-Rho coinage is more akin to orthodox Christian symbolism and that it was anti-Arian and at variance with Constantius' own position. In his 1983

Supplementary work Bastien adjusted his view and stated that this imagery might have had more of a political significance than a religious one, also suggesting that this depiction was not so much anti-Arian, as pro-orthodox (and thus pro-Magnentius supporters).

Had the Chi-Rho issue been a product of Constantius at the mints under his control then it would be expected that some or all of those other mints would also have produced coins with this reverse. They did not. They must therefore have been issued not *by* Constantius but *for* Constantius, sometime before he took over at Trier (ie, from at least August 353 and after the death of Magnentius).

Not only would Constantius not have produced this coinage himself, he would not have permitted its continuation, and in fact did not allow it (according to Harl and Kent, Constantius specifically demonetised the Magnentian coinage sometime in early 354, in an attempt to remove it from circulation [both referring to the *Codex Theodosianus* 9.23.1]).

Date of the revolt

To summarise, the coins have to be issued after the elevation of Decentius in 351, after the battle of Mursa and the loss of the mints of Rome and Aquileia in late 352. The weights and diameters place the Constantius coins after those of Magnentius, and that issue as a whole falls into the period from c. January to August 353 (the deaths of the usurpers). Allowing for the various periods of travel (for a fleeing Decentius and hurried messengers) as well as other contingencies, we have an approximate starting date of late-June to early-July, and a probable end date of some time after the middle of August, perhaps early September. The revolt of Poemenius, and with it this exceptional coinage, must therefore have taken place at some time between these dates, and the most likely period is from about the first week of July until the last week of August, 353.

Conclusion

The revolt of Poemenius was a short-lived and ultimately successful event in the turbulent history of the fragmented Roman Empire of the mid-fourth century. It has given us a fascinating issue of coins and a wonderful story. Few individual pieces speak to us and bear witness in such a way as to directly relate to a precise event and time as do these. It is unfortunate that we know nothing more about the character himself. All that remains of him and his impact on history is a single sentence in a very old and mostly lost document—and his legacy of a small number of extra-ordinary coins.

This article has been adapted from one that appeared in The Celator, Vol.18 No.5, May 2004, with some minor adjustments and adaptations, and with additional information from another article presented in the American Journal of Numismatics,

Volume 15, New York 2003; both written by this author. Some additional relevant information may be obtained from these articles.

Acknowledgement

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Endnotes

- i. Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire* (AD 354–378), selected & translated by Walter Hamilton with introduction and notes by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, London, 1986; xv.6.4.
- ii. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, London and USA, nd (c.1925), p.588; Constans was pursuing ‘...pleasures of a more private and criminal nature’.
- iii. Poemenius was executed after the Silvanus revolt in 355, Amm. Marc. xv.6.4:
post hunc damnatorum sorte Poemenius raptus ad supplicium interiit, qui, ut supra rettulimus, cum Treveri civitatem Caesari clausissent Decentio, ad defendendam plebem electus est.
- iv. JPC Kent, ‘The Revolt of Trier Against Magnentius’, *Numismatic Chronicle* (NC), 1959, p 105f.
- v. JPC Kent, *Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol VIII (RIC VIII), edited by CHV Sutherland & RAG Carson, London 1981; Aquileia 35.
- vi. Pierre Bastien, “Décence, Poemenius. Problèmes de Chronologie.” *Quaderni Ticinesi Numismatica e Antichità Classiche*, vol. XII (1983), p 188f., and further addressed in Bastien *Supplément*, p 247f.
- vii. Pierre Bastien, *Le Monnayage De Magnence (350–353)*, Wetteren, 1964, pp 24, 69ff. (Placing them into his 7th phase, ‘Début 353–Août 353’).
- viii. The source for the figures used in this table is RIC VIII, all western mints. This information is generally supported by reference to hoard reports, sale and auction catalogues, public and private collections.
- ix. Andrew Burnett and JD Hill, *Welbourn, Lincolnshire*, in the soon to be published *Coin*

Hoards of Roman Britain, vol XII, London, in print. 93 pieces in total, including 24 pieces from Trier in the name of Constantius II. Fernando López-Sánchez, 'A Discussion of the Poemenius Coins in the Welbourn Hoard' (translated by Jane Coyle) in the above CHRIB XII.

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