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The “As de Nîmes”, a Roman Coin and the Myth of Antony and Cleopatra: Octavian and Agrippa victorious over Antony

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Abstract: Establishment of Augustus authority in partnership with Agrippa, when Rome was evolving from a “republic” into an empire, led to a political propaganda. The four series of the “As de Nîmes”, bronze coins struck under Augustus and Agrippa, commemorate the capture of Egypt and the establishment of veterans in Nemausus (Nîmes, France).

The iconography of this Roman coin is related to the specific history between 28 BC and 14 AD of Octavian and his general Agrippa, who defeated Mark Antony and Cleopatra at Actium, as expressed on the reverse, where a crocodile chained to a palm is depicted. Both palm and crocodile symbolize not only the capture of Egypt, but also the defeat of Mark Antony. The palm represents also the “victory” in a grotesque scene in which his love for Cleopatra converted Antony into a loser. It is then concluded that these coins preserve the memory of Octavian’s victory over the iconic figure of Antony.

Conservation of items in museums is not only a matter about preservation and restoration to prevent destruction; it is also about securing the memory of the ever-lasting significance of historical figures. Museums preserve remains of ancient worlds in the form of objects, bringing the possibility to revive the past. The memory of an object is then to be found in the mind because it is not a passive persistence. But, what is the reality of memory in relation with to the past?



Figure 1: Innumerable bronze coins from Nîmes are known with back-to-back heads of Augustus and Agrippa and legend IMP DIVI F on the obverse, and a crocodile chained to a palm, flanked by legend COL NEM, on the reverse (Blanchet and Dieudonné, 1912) © PF Puech.

Considering the question of setting memories, there are several ways to improve perception. The first necessary condition to store something deeply is to hold the attention. Memory obeys easily to the heart, even when it is placed under the guidance of the intelligence. Storing information implies significant attention. The bronze coins commemorating Augustus and

Agrippa’s victory over Antony and Cleopatra recall these processes, with an emphasis on the elements of discovery that comes with archeological conservation. In 1517, a bronze coin with the reverse legend COL NEM (which reminded that Nîmes was a Roman colony) was unearthed, and thus rediscovered, near an ancient temple of the city (cf. Fig. 1).

Since that moment, the city adopted the image of a reptile chained to a palm tree as its coat of arms. That anecdote will allow us to illustrate how Roman coins from Nîmes have maintained and issued some historical memory from the key event of the conquest of Egypt by Octavian and the suicide of Antony and Cleopatra.

1. Coin Design

Coins with the legend “COL NEM” have been dated no earlier than 40 BC (Burnett *et al*, 1992, p.152-153, Christol and Goudineau, 1987, p. 95-96). Agrippa, sent to Gaul in October 40 BC (Roddaz, 1984, p. 66-69), could, therefore, have been responsible for creating the Latin colony of Nemausus, a changing station on the Via Domitia. Agrippa was in Gaul to take it under his control on behalf of Octavian, and coinage struck in 38 BC in his military, mobile mint shows three typologies, each depicting the common feature of Agrippa’s inscription M[arcus] Agrippa CO[nsul] DESIG[natus] on the reverse. Their obverses differ in that Julius Caesar is portrayed on the aureus, while the head of Octavian or the facing heads of Caesar and Octavian appear on the denarii (*Roman Provincial Coinage* illustrated catalogs [RPC 534]: Crawford, 1974). The inscription [D]IVOS IVLIVS DIVI [F] is shown together with the oak-wreathed head of the deified Julius Caesar facing Octavian’s bare head.

By 30 BC, Nemausus became an important imperial coin mint, as proved by the archaeological finds throughout Gaul of copper alloy coinage depicting Agrippa and Augustus and struck in *Colonia Nemausus*. There are similarities between this coinage and that found in Lyon, Narbonne and Nîmes, Orange and Vienne, depicting the heads of Octavian and Agrippa. The *dupondii* RPC 533 from Arausio (Orange) show the heads of Agrippa and Augustus back to back with the inscription IMP above and DIVI F below. Agrippa has, therefore, replaced Julius Caesar’s portrait and this feature would precede Agrippa’s head wearing a rostral crown on Nîmes coins. However, this coinage may be prior to 28 BC consulate, which was shared by the two inseparable friends, Octavian and Agrippa. Dated in that same year 28 BC, a mention must be made of the Octavian coins minted in the East, depicting a crocodile with the legend AEGVPTO CAPTA (“with Egypt having been captured”) on the reverse, while on the obverse Octavian is presented bareheaded and clean shaven (*Roman Imperial Coinage* illustrated catalogs RIC 275a-b and 544-5).

The legend: *COL onia NEM ausus*. Nemausus was an aquatic deity who gave its name to the city of Nîmes (NAMAΣAT, in Gallic). The abbreviations COL NEM first appeared following Caesar’s death on small silver coins of Nîmes that had the same weight as the Massaliot obols. Jean-Baptiste Giard (1971, 1974) reckons that these obols were struck mainly to pay the veterans recently settled in Narbonne, then governed by Lepidus. It was the time of the triumvirs, and the use of colonial coinage followed the Gallo-Greek currency. Roman legends had already replaced the Greek characters. Gallic towns of current Languedoc had been using the Greek language to keep their trade with Eastern Mediterranean areas through the coastal city of Marseille. But after being subdued to Roman rule, Nîmes became a colony and this fact, therefore, was stated on the coins, particularly on its *dupondius* type, nicknamed “bronze crocodile ace”, whose minting began in 28-27 BC.

The initial issue commemorates the founding of the *deductio*, the settlement formed by pieces of land that were granted to war veterans from the Octavian’s troops and Mark Antony’s Alexandrian-Greek army that had been released from service after the battle of Actium (Hirschfeld, quoted by Christol and Goudineau 1987 p. 83-103). The “Greco-Oriental” *deductio* was therefore inhabited by a bi-cultural community where the use of Greek was persistent and whose settlers’ blood was

gradually mixing. The bronze “crocodile” ace of Nîmes was first struck prior to January 16th, 27 AD, according to the legend on the obverse: **IMP**erator (holder of the *IMPERIUM*, military power) and **DIVI** Filius (son of God, Caesar). It coincided with the presence of Augustus in Gaul and his first census there, together with the founding of the three provinces in Northern Gaul.

These are some of the most remarkable facts of Octavian’s life: in 28 BC, he was named *princeps senatus*, did the *census* with Agrippa and rebuilt eighty-two temples; in early 27 BC, he accepted the supreme command of the armies with the title of imperator and, on January 16th, the Senate and the people granted him the title of Augustus.

The establishment of Roman legions and some traces of a new type of currency in Nîmes bring us to link coin issues and employment. A closer look to the map of the detected mints (with full *grenitis*, so present in the early processes of money making) has allowed hypothesizing that the troops marching from Nîmes to Germany were accompanied by an itinerant mint (Richard Ralite, 2012).

The “As de Nîmes” type. In the beginning, Romans used a kind of blocks as currency that later became bronze discs named “aces” (“aes” = bronze). The bronze divisional coins most widely used were the *sestertius* and the *dupondius*, being the latter a word compounded by *duo* (two) and *pondus* (weight), i.e., “worth two aces”. The Roman “crocodile and palm tree” bronze coin is a *dupondius* commonly referred as the “Ace de Nîmes” (Besombes, 2001). The features on the obverse link this coin to the Republican ace showing the double profile of Janus Bifrons. Janus was the god of the beginnings, and also of the transitions representing the evolution from an earlier period to a “golden age”. An idealized image of Octavian (a new age promoter also associated to the cult of Nîmes source *Nemausus*) was erected in a shrine dedicated to him (Christol and Goudineau, 1987). Octavian and Agrippa association in the reconquest of Egypt and the fact that both were born in 63 BC also recall the memory of the twins Romulus and Remus. Additionally, the images of the heavenly twins Castor, related to the earth, and Pollux, deified in heaven, inspire the images of Agrippa as the military man who wins battles and of Augustus as the guardian of peace. Therefore, with their presence, Octavian/Augustus and Agrippa honored Nîmes with their presence.

Although both back-to-back portraits are on the same level, only Octavian is referred in the legend IMP DIVI. F, which is completed by PP (*pater patriae*) in the latter series belonging to the so-called “group III type 4”. Regarding this reference, some authors have recognized Tiberius Augustus’ portrait instead of Agrippa’s. Moneyers took advantage of their resemblance and knew that Tiberius accompanied Augustus during his three-year stay in Gaul and Spain (16-13 BC.), while Tiberius probably became the ruler of Nîmes (Christol and Goudineau, 1987 p. 100). Besides the official issues of this coin, some extraordinary copies are considered to be “*ex-voto*” because they were found in the basin of the *Nemausus* sacred fountain at Nîmes. These Augustus and Agrippa bronze coins depict an additional standing boar and were minted to replace the animal sacrifice (Veyrac, 1998 p. 13-15). The sanctuary, the *Augusteum* of the colony, offers the possibility of a direct relationship between the city and the power of Rome; the formation of a colonial elite may explain the election of Nîmes as the mint and the distribution center of the “As of Nîmes”.

Coinage minting was an extraordinary activity in the colony as countless bronze pieces struck in Nîmes are known. Many dies show a bearded Agrippa wearing a naval crown adorned with a ship prow (cf. Fig. 2).

This rostral crown commemorates his naval victories. The peculiarities of the engravings depicting Octavian / Augustus are related to different periods of his rule (Roddaz, 1984 p. 207 and 596). Octavian is shown bareheaded in the first two coin issues: on types 1 there is a dot after COL and beaded lines gather Augustus and Agrippa’s hair; on types 2, struck in a different metal, Octavian wears an oak crown as if it was laurel. Three series of *Nemausus* are described in the *Roman Imperial Coinage* illustrated catalogs: group I (fig. 3) is formed by 28-9 BC (RIC 1² 155-

157); group II, by 8 BC-3 BC (RIC 1² 158); and group III (fig. 4), by AD 10-14 (RIC 1² 159-161). The coins conserved at the *Musée Départemental Arles Antique* (Fan) allow us to illustrate two types of *dupondii* with the inventory references FAN 1 and 2 (cf. Fig. 3-4).



Figure 2: *As de Nîmes*, impression of group I from Arles (FAN2 MDAA), depicting a bearded Agrippa wearing the rostral crown reserved for winners of naval battles. Image made of 8 assembled macrophotographies. © PF Puech.



Figure 3: *As de Nîmes*, group I MDAA Arles FAN2. Diam. 24.7 mm; 10.16 g. © PF Puech.



Figure 4: *As de Nîmes*, group III, type 4, MDAA Arles FAN1 12.13 g, diam. 26.4 mm © PF Puech

Crocodile and palm. We recognize the reverse of the bronze ace from Nîmes by its crocodile chained to a vertical palm (cf. Fig. 1), which in some coins rather seems one of its leaves. At

Glanum, where Agrippa went to heal his leg, a triumphal arch commemorating the conquest of Rome bears the image of a chained captive. Therefore, it is widely accepted that the crocodile chained to a palm symbolizes the naval victory of Octavian and Agrippa at Actium on September 2nd, 31 BC, against Antony and Cleopatra.

Although the palm is a clear reference to Egypt, there are other two features at its base that may need some further interpretation. By the time when the first ases were struck in Nîmes, Octavian was married to Livia Drusilla, who had two children of her first marriage to Tiberius Claudius Nero (of whom she divorced to marry Octavian):

- Tiberius Claudius Nero, born in 42 BC, who would later become Tiberius, Augustus' successor.
- Claudius Nero Drusus, born in 38 BC and died in 9 BC.

Therefore, there is a possibility that the two splits shown under the crocodile were meant to symbolize those two children (cf. Fig. 5).



Figure 5: As de Nîmes, group I, diam. 25 mm, 12.88 g, and MARK ANTONY silver legionary denarius 32-31 BC. Crawford 544/19 © PF Puech modif.CNG cop Wikipedia

On the top of the central palm, there is a crown with a ribbon floating on both sides. Between the crown and the crocodile with the raising tale below there is the inscription COL NEM. The crocodile meaning may go further than the reference to Egypt. Augustus' denarius of Ephesus (RIC 275a), dated in 29-27 BC, shows the legend AEGVPTO CAPTA ("Egypt having been captured") around the crocodile with its tail staying down. The raised tail may refer, therefore, to the hero who, even having been defeated, conserved Cleopatra's love. The crocodile "embraces" the galley of the famous silver legionary denarius of Mark Antony (Crawford 544/19, 32-31 BC). It's a sort of "ship-animal" that symbolizes both Antony and Egypt (cf. fig. 5).

2. Antony and Cleopatra

The struggle for supremacy over the Roman Empire between Octavian and Antony took also the form of words and images. In his book *50*, Cassius Dio (Dio, 1917) writes: "*Antony had been depicted on statues and paintings as Dionysus accompanied by Cleopatra as Selene*" (505.3). The same book also says: (5025.1) "*Who would not lament at seeing Roman soldiers acting as bodyguards of their queen? Who would not groan at hearing that Roman knights and senators fawn upon her like eunuchs?*" (5025.2) "*Who would not weep when he hears and sees Antony himself, the man twice consul, often imperator, to whom was committed in common with me the management of the public business, who was entrusted with so many cities, so many legions*" (5025.3) when he

sees that this man has now abandoned all his ancestors' habits of life, has emulated all alien and barbaric customs, that he pays no honour to us or to the laws or to his fathers' gods, but pays homage to that wench as if she were some Isis or Selene, calling her children Helios and Selene, (5025.4) and finally taking for himself the title of Osiris or Dionysus, and, after all this, making presents of whole islands and parts of the continents, as though he were master of the whole earth and the whole sea?(5025.5) All these things seem marvelous and incredible to you, soldiers, as I am well aware, but you ought therefore to be the more indignant. For if that is actually true which you do not believe even when you hear it, and if that man in his luxurious indulgence does commit acts at which anyone would grieve who learns of them, would it not be reasonable that you should go past all bounds in your rage?'

Antony's silver cistophori (RPC 2201 and 2202), minted around 39 BC, depicted some elements that were traditionally related to Dionysus, together with a Latin legend and an image of Antony himself and his wife Octavia. Produced possibly in Ephesus, the coin circulated almost exclusively in the Roman province of Asia (Horne, 2009) but, in fact, it is the last clear indication of the dynastic links of Antony to Egypt, which in Rome was taken as an evidence of Antony's desertion from Roman values. The joint image of Mark Antony and Cleopatra on the silver tetradrachms RPC 4094 (36-33 BC) and RPC 4771 (32-31 BC.) confirms their political union, but the individual sovereignty of either is distinctly maintained by showing them separately on the obverse and the reverse.

The image showing the diademed and draped bust of Cleopatra together with the bare head of Antony [RPC 4752] has been seen as the symbol of the dynastic link firmly cemented. The donation of Alexandria, in whose ceremony Antony paraded dressed as Dionysus, and the distribution of Rome's eastern territories among Cleopatra's children were the actions that propelled Octavian's propagandistic efforts to earn the support of Rome's political elite and ultimately led the Senate to declare the war on Cleopatra in 32 BC.

Augustus brought some order when winning the propagandistic battle after he defeated Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium. “It was Vigil's particular fame and fortune to have lived and written in this rare and most intense time when the darkness had, for a moment anyway, relented. Both Aeneas and Antony must choose between their country and their queen [For Virgil, it was easy to praise Augustus transposing the story of Antony and Cleopatra to write the *Aeneid*]. The ultimate difference between the two men is that Aeneas chooses duty while Antony chooses Cleopatra. Because of their different choices, their respective outcomes are also different.” (Scholla, 2009).

The scandalous liaison had to be denounced by the Octavian's supporters and Antony had to die a second time as it was necessary to definitively wipe out his memory (Puech and Puech, 2009). After the victory, propaganda presented Antony and the people of Egypt as barbarians, people with effeminate and debauched manners who practiced a kind of love that turned winners into losers. Then a *terra sigillata* (from Latin *sigillum*, meaning seal) circulated with a very popular grotesque scene: Cleopatra, holding a “victory” palm, engages in debauchery with a crocodile (Paunier, 2005). Manufactured in large quantities, these ceramic pieces also show the widely popular 'Isis sailing' type and have been found in some archeological sites, such as one in Geneva, where it was part of an oil lamp and depicts Cleopatra's obscene position above a crocodile symbolizing Mark Antony (cf. Fig. 6).

Much has been written on the crocodile, often carved like a fantastic beast. This crocodile symbolizes Egypt when it is depicted tied to a flexible rod that bends to the right in most cases, and in the “Asses of Nîmes” is always decorated with bands representing the victory of Octavian and Agrippa. Mark Antony was first defeated for having tied himself to Cleopatra. In this case, Antony is presented as a crocodile, the symbol of Egypt, as both Antony and Egypt were ruled by Cleopatra.

Now, in what sense can we speak of keeping alive the memory about the crocodile and the palm on Roman coins? Few lovers are more famous than Cleopatra, queen of the Nile, and Antony, her Roman general. The simple answer could then be that Antony and Cleopatra became iconic figures.

The history of Roman politics is a real tangle. The tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra is that of an action man who ended up losing the war. Through the portraits that history traces, Mark Antony's life appears as the result of a strength released by an impetuous and brave character. Antony was also Cleopatra's "man of men". The need of representing Antony as a "furious" beast to forge the Roman perspective more significantly, explains the grotesque crocodile appearance with a large upper jaw teeth planted on top of the upper jaw, instead of being within the open mouth, as noted by Amardel in 1908 (cf. Fig. 7).



Figure 6: popular grotesque allegory found in some legion camps after the submission of Egypt: Cleopatra, holding a palm, engages in debauchery with a crocodile. Museum of Art and History in Geneva: hazel or dark brown glazed piece of clay with a relief decoration. The medallion fragment is from a Roman lamp with an anvil beak (diam. 6.1 cm) no. C 1474: fragment of a lamp of Italian or Gallic production, showing an erotic motif. Dated in the 1st century BC. Loeschke type IV. Geneva (House Broliet). ©Museum of Art and History in Geneva

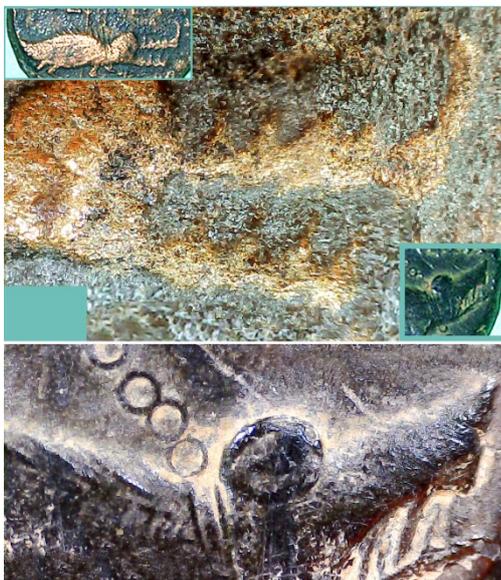


Figure 7: As of Nîmes, group 2 and group 4, MDAA (Departmental Archeological Museum of Arles): different aspects given to the crocodile head with a boar muzzle and a big eye. © PF Puech.

3. Conclusion

Not the whole past can be contained in a museum, just a selected part of it. The palm and the crocodile offer an answer to coin interpretation through the figures shown on a piece of pottery conserved in Geneva (Switzerland) and constitute a repetitive association of ideas that contains the essences of the past. The expansion of the Roman Empire, with its different manifestations and stages, was marked by the struggle between Antony and Octavian, a fact that had a huge impact on life in the provinces. Octavian had a big influence on public opinion due to his authority based on military victories obtained in collaboration with Agrippa, which also formed the traditional image of “*collega Augusti*”. This is illustrated by the “As de Nîmes”, where the legitimate effigies on the obverse symbolize the power and the submission of both Egypt and Mark Antony (who had been a hero of the civil wars), two figures that are symbolized by the images shown on the reverse. Models developed by local coin engravers and pottery craftsmen were based on these ideas, which crystallized in the public opinion and were preserved by tradition after going through the filters of the Roman propaganda. This official propaganda can be seen as an attempt to keep a permanent influence to transform people’s opinion under the Roman rule, but the image of the crocodile on the “As de Nîmes” reverse proves that memory has more than one point of view.

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