

PROCEEDINGS OF THE
XIVth INTERNATIONAL NUMISMATIC CONGRESS
GLASGOW 2009

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‘THE RESTORATION OF MEMORY: MINUCIUS AND HIS MONUMENT’

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It is generally accepted that the introduction of the Lex Gabinia in 139 stimulated Republican moneyers to begin to make individual obverse and reverse types on denarii, as they sought to gain attention as candidates for office in a time when voters no longer had to announce their choice publicly. These changing types have long been studied to provide us with insight into Roman political events, alliances, and family propaganda. I will examine the column which two Minucii place on their reverses to argue that the column is meant to convince viewers both of the ancient origins of this family and of the family’s reputation for piety and city management.

Two men, who are usually called brothers because the reverses of their coins are extremely similar, minted in the second half of the second century. There are a number of hoards which allowed Crawford to place the minting of the coins right around the year 135, though sliding them one or two years in either direction is not unthinkable. On their obverses they have the normal helmeted head of Roma (*RRC* 242/1) (*RRC* 243/1).

The reverses are centered on a small statue placed on a column, flanked by two standing male figures. The column is made with rusticated drums, set off by a rectangular base. From this base sprout large ears of wheat and, on Caius’s coin, animal protomes. The column tapers towards the top, but is finished with a small Aeolic capital; from the statue-base hang beaded ropes or chains which hold large bells. On top is a standing figure, dressed in a tunic and toga, holding a scepter. To the left of the column is a statue of a togate male standing in profile, placing his left foot on a grain measure. He holds two indistinct objects in his hands in front of his body as he looks at the statue to the right of the column. This second statue also stands with his profile to the viewer; he is garbed in a toga which covers his head. In his raised right hand he extends a lituus.

Historians of ancient Rome have long argued that the early history of the city is distorted by the aristocratic families of the middle and late Republic who wished to invent members of their families and tales of their deeds in order to burnish their own reputations and cement in the minds of their peers their fitness for office. Coins are the perfect medium by which to transmit these revised family histories to a large public, as has also long been recognized by scholars. Even the barest recounting of the famous ancestors of the Minucii underlines how revisionist is the history of the family.

Four Minucii are said to have held the consulship in the fifth century. In the fourth century the Minucii hold the tribunate of the plebs, and about one hundred years later, a Minucius is recorded as a consul. The last was closely followed by M. Minucius Faesus as one of the first plebeian augurs, in 300 (Broughton, *MRR* 1.173). It seems likely that because Faesus was a special kind of priest, the name Augurinus was later attached to the family, possibly even as late as the second century.

The other Minucius who will figure in our interpretation of the coin type is the problematic L. Minucius (sometimes referred to as Esquilinus Augurinus, Broughton *MRR* 1.39), whose convoluted career is largely suspect. The story was of interest to the Romans in the second half of the second century, since they were again arguing over the role of the tribunes in the feeding of the populace, and there was a renewed interest in the authority of the Senate to put to death enemies of the state, due to the death of the Gracchi. In the fullest accounts, Minucius was elected consul (or

suffect) for 458 and sent against the Aequi led by Cloelius Gracchus. Minucius is next seen eight years later elected tribune to become part of the (fictitious) second set of *decemviri*. Minucius drops out of sight for a number of years, only to be appointed the first *praefectus annonae*, in charge of the grain supply to Rome, in 440 and 439. He was prefect during a grain shortage, when he reported to the Senate that an equestrian named Spurius Maelius had bought up large quantities of grain from Etruria and was distributing it free to the hungry crowd in Rome. As the Senate was fearful that Maelius aimed to become king, they appointed Cincinnatus dictator. Cincinnatus ordered his Master of the Horse to kill Maelius. Pliny records that the people of Rome commissioned and paid for a statue on a column outside the Porta Trigemina as a reward for Minucius (*NH* 34.21); Livy notes that he received a *bove aurato* (a golden ox) outside the same gate (4.16).

The years around 135 were tumultuous ones. Rome was fighting two wars, the Numantine War and the Slave War in Sicily. And, while the needs which drove the agrarian reforms of the Gracchi are still being debated, it is clear that there was some emergency for the small farmers in the area around Rome. Events first came to a head in 133, during the tribunate and assassination of Ti. Gracchus. Faced with a frightening revolt of slaves which was in its initial stages successful, the uproar over the political events and military defeats occasioned by the Numantine war, and the rising tensions in the capital among various families, perhaps it is not surprising that the Minucii sought to restore their place in the ranks of the Senate by referring to a time in their family's history when they had successfully intervened in a similar political crisis and helped the people by assuring the grain supply – at least according to their version of history.

The monument that was voted to honor L. Minucius is problematic. Pliny notes that the statue for Minucius was paid for by a levy of 1/12th an *as* per head. He speculated that this was the first time a statue was voted for a man by the people, and not the Senate, but immediately deflates the importance of Minucius's reward by snidely noting 'it would be a very distinguished honor had it not originated on such unimportant occasions' (34.21 trans. H. Rackham, 1952). Pliny earlier noted the statue only in regard to the reduction in the cost of grain in the context of Minucius informing the Senate about Maelius's plans (*NH* 18.4).

Livy discusses Minucius's reward in the context of the Maelius episode and notes an inscription on the statue that referred to Minucius's status as a co-opted tribune, with the aside that 'the common people had no objection as he let them have for a penny a bushel all the grain which had been bought up by Maelius' (4.16 trans. de Sélincourt, 1960). He does not tell us where the statue is nor what it looked like. If the Porta Trigemina is to be equated with the Porta Minucia, then Festus tells us that we should also find an altar or shrine here (Festus 122, 147).

Thus, a statue seems to have been erected by the end of the Republic, though the inscription on it seems to have been limited to the name L. Minucius Augurinus, his rank of *praefectus annonae* (?), the rank of co-opted tribune (are these two offices the 'occasions' that Pliny refers to?), the reduction in the price of grain he effected, the levy raised to pay for the statue, and little else. Clearly the inscription did *not* mention the slaying of Maelius; Livy and Pliny assume that the statue was erected as a reward for Minucius's role in the killing of the tyrant, but it is never explicitly stated by either of them that the monument reflects this deed. But the reference in the statue's inscription to the office of *praefectus annonae* would be enough to associate this area with grain distributions, as appeared to have happened in the early Empire.

Propaganda of the Coin Type

The figure to the left of the column is often identified as L. Minucius, the *praefectus annonae*, although the identity of the figure must be understood in conjunction with the identity of the figure on top of the column. The *modius* under his foot makes the identification of a man best known for grain distribution obvious. The other statue, since he is veiled and holds a lituus, is consistently called M. Minucius Faesus, the first plebeian augur, the only recorded augur in the family.

This leaves the problem of the identity of the figure on the top of the column. In his right hand he holds a scepter, which is distinguished from a spear by being formed by a row of joined circles. A scepter rightfully belongs to a god as seen on contemporary coins held in the hand of Jupiter. Spears have smooth shafts and pointed tips, and can be seen in the representations of Mars or the Dioscuri. Staffs have smooth shafts but are shorter, as seen in the hands of the shepherd Faustulus. In other words, the clear attribute that can be identified from this figure is his scepter.

The form of the column itself also requires some comment, owing to its archaic-looking features. I can find no parallel to this type of column shaft in Greek, Etruscan or early Roman sources, nor can I find any early versions of rusticated column drums.

Pliny tells us that statues placed on columns are known in Rome by the second half of the fourth century, citing one erected for Caius Maenius (*NH* 34.20). The only coin that depicts a statue on top of a column shows a highly variable form of the column. Denarii of L. Censorinus (*RRC* 363) show a statue of a dancing Marsyas. Just behind him is a small column with a figure on top. The figure, which can be seen on some coins to have a long chiton and carry a spear and shield, is Minerva. The shaft of the column can be shown as smooth, or fluted in a spiral or, on a small number of dies, with rounded drums with moldings between each drum. If this Marsyas depicts the statue of Marsyas in the Forum (as generally acknowledged), then the column shown is the *Columna Maenia*, erected in 338 (*Plin. NH* 34.20). Although the column shaft is not shown in a consistent fashion, when it is shown with rusticated drums, the die engraver may again be referring to the early date of the column. Thus, we have two interesting parallels to the Minucian monument: the column was erected to honor a living Roman senator, but the statue on top is a deity, not the honoree; and the shaft of the column injects a note of fantasy to the depiction.

The fantastic nature of the Minucian column is emphasized by its additions – protomes of lions, ears of wheat, and hanging bells. There are no parallels for lion protomes sprouting from the base of columns or shafts in Etruscan or South Italian art. Foliate elements sprout and hang from Etruscan bronze furniture, even if they seem to be missing from actual columns. Ears of wheat are completely absent even in foliated furniture shafts. Bells do not appear on Etruscan monuments nor on representations of monuments, but we are told that the tomb of Lars Porsenna was adorned with them (*Plin. NH* 36.91). On the whole, the rustication, lion protomes, ears of wheat and bells all contribute to a sense of archaism in the depiction of the monument, but when analyzed, also give the impression of fantasy, especially in the combination of these elements.

What, then, does the coin purport to show? The first possibility is the obvious one, that the column and statue represent a late fifth-century monument erected for the *praefectus annonae* near the *Porta Trigemina*. The Minucii of the third quarter of the second century decided to depict the column in all its archaic glory, to remind voters why they should be returned to power. If we follow iconographers arguing in this vein, then the statue on top is the *praefectus annonae*, as Pliny implies that he was rewarded with a statue on top of a column. Yet this Minucius cannot be the statue on the column, as L. Minucius is shown to the left of the column, his foot upon a *modius*. Hence, iconographers must posit an even older monument, one that is not connected to the *praefectus an-*

nonae, but to an earlier Minucius. The unstated next step is that a statue of L. Minucius was added to the already existing monument in the late fifth century; Pliny and Livy then give us a rendition of sorts of the inscription found on its base. To continue with this unstated argument, the statue to the right shows the plebeian augur, and must have been added to the monument c.300 or later. To make sense of the coin reverse, one would have to see a fifth-century columnar statue to one of the early consuls holding a scepter – or perhaps a heroized Ur-Minucius – to which a later statue of L. Minucius was added, and even later the statue of the plebeian augur joined them. Pliny mixed up the identities of the columnar Ur-Minucius and the *praefectus annonae* standing on a nearby base, and ignored the plebeian augur.

There is another solution to the reverse which takes into account all of the details of the column and all of the figures portrayed. The wheat ears and the lion protomes mark clearly the occasion of the monument, which was also stressed by the inscription – the reduction of the cost of grain and consequent relief of the famine by the *praefectus annonae*. Lions are attributes of Cybele, who is conflated with Demeter, the goddess of grain. The grain ears and lions may also give a clue to the identity of the togate god on top of the column. It is possible that the statue depicted Consus, the god of grain storage, who had an underground altar in the Circus Maximus (Dion. Hal. 2.31.2-3, Tert. *De Spect.* 5.8). If so, we have a neat parallel to the Maenian statue; although both the Maenian column and the Minucian column are said by Pliny to have been erected in honor of senators, the statues on top of the columns depict gods, not the mortals who are honored on inscriptions on the bases. This identification with Consus also eliminates a need to postulate an Ur-Minucius and a unique funerary monument.

The archaisizing quality of the column was clearly intentional. We should exercise some caution in interpreting this column as a ‘real’ monument, taking a clue from the reverses of L. Censorinus, which clearly injected a note of fantasy into the rendition of the column by showing it as having three different kinds of shafts. Since there are no good parallels for the rustication, nor any for columns decorated with bells or animal protomes, we may be looking at a monument created by the moneyers to remind the viewers why they needed to be voted into office.

Thus, we face the real possibility that the Minucian column didn’t exist when the die cutters created their reverses. Clearly, Pliny saw something that was connected to the *praefectus annonae*, but what if this monument was created at the same time that Caius and Tiberius were making their bid for office? The die cutters could have responded to the brothers’ need to emphasize the long service of their family to Rome by creating an ‘old’ column, while the Minucii erected a column near the Porta Trigemina. Such a reconstruction would also help explain the inscription on the column, which appears not to mention the Maelius incident. The coin and the column were built before the story of the involvement of the *praefectus annonae* in the death of Maelius was invented (or at least elaborated upon), after the deaths of the Gracchi.

The Minucii, who had been out of power for too long a time, and who desperately needed to advertise something about their family to voters, chose to restore to Roman memory the praise of their famous men and the deeds that begat the Minucii. While there certainly were statues of famous men (and in one case, a famous woman) erected in Rome in the early Republic, as we move into the second century the number of statues erected increased, if only because of the increasing Hellenization of Rome and the rising wealth of the inhabitants, especially after the Hannibalic War. The second century was a remarkable period of building of temples and victory monuments in Rome. Along with this grew the mania for finding (and fabricating) ancestors. Thus, calling attention to one’s own family at a time when the family has been out of power for a very long time by erecting honorary statues for two of the most famous ancestors of the line would fit with our

understanding of this period of the Republic.

And so the second-century Minucii seem to be very much within the mainstream of Roman aristocratic display. They assigned a particular physical area of the city to great deeds of an ancestor, and marked it as their own by placing honorary statues to two ‘ancestors’, at a spot that had ramifications for both these ancestors, by emphasizing attention to the grain supply of the city and early involvement in civic and religious affairs. By inventing the name Augurinus, they could allude to the magistracy that the plebeian Minucius held, in order to emphasize their own fitness for the office. Yet they were also radically different, in placing this familial boast on the reverses of coins. Reverses of denarii had, up until this point, been entirely consumed by propaganda on a meta-level. It is very likely that the Minucian brother who thought of this breathtaking new development was pushed by the fact that his family needed the ‘bump’ in the polls; they perhaps could not count on their fellow aristocrats to help restore them to power, and were worried about the use of the secret ballot. Thus, they ‘restored’ the memory of the former Minucii by placing their monument on their coins and in the city, and insisted that it was a very old honor for an ancient family. How right they were to worry, and how thoughtful of them to change the reverses of Roman denarii for ever.