

## 19

# The Hinton St Mary head of Christ and a coin of Magnentius

by T. Sam N. Moorhead<sup>1</sup>

This note is an updated version of a piece written a few years ago, alongside a longer essay on Christianity in Roman Britain by Catherine Johns (Moorhead 2000, 22-3; Johns 2000, 16-21). Catherine was a tremendous support to me whilst we worked together with the Romano-British collections and Don Bailey was a constant source of important information about Roman Egypt. Both value scholarship as the foundation of museology, and both are always generous and patient in providing assistance.

In this piece I have expanded upon the original article and have explored one or two more avenues. The association of a coin issue of the emperor Magnentius with the imagery of the Hinton St Mary mosaic is not entirely original, the link having been mooted before (*inter alios* Henig 1995, 101, 156), but it has been my intention to broaden the discussion.

At present, only the central roundel of the celebrated mosaic, from Hinton St Mary, Dorset, is exhibited in the British Museum's Weston Gallery of Roman Britain (Figs 1-2; Toynbee 1964). The iconography of the mosaic as a whole prompts some interesting questions, especially as the head of Christ is juxtaposed with the motif of Bellerophon slaying the Chimaera, a common pagan theme at the time which also appeared in Christian contexts (Neal 1981, 87-9, pl. 61). Another well-known depiction of the scene is a subject of the main mosaic at Lullingstone villa in Kent, where there was a famous 'house church' (Meates 1979, 73ff; 1987, 11ff). As Martin Henig notes, there were evidently some villa owners who could accept Christian and pagan images alongside each other, a point further underlined by another Dorset mosaic, from Frampton villa, also apparently depicting Bellerophon (Henig 1995, 154-5; Lysons 1813, iii, pl. V).

If the depiction of Bellerophon and the Chimaera was common, to the extent that one would expect it to have featured in the pattern books of mosaicists, the portrayal

of Christ was not. The mosaicist at Hinton St Mary villa might have felt on secure ground when asked to portray the former, but he would very likely have been perplexed at a request for the latter. There is no evidence for such a portrayal from anywhere else in Roman Britain at this time.

It might have been at this juncture that a coin of Magnentius (or his brother Decentius) was produced as a model (Fig. 3). On the reverse was the, by then, quite common Christian symbol, the chi-rho (the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek superimposed) in between an alpha and omega (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet) (Kent 1981, Amiens, 34-45; Trier 318-27A; Lyon 153-76; Arles, 188-202). It should be noted that at least one scholar has suggested a coin of Constans or Constantius II (Frend 1996, 351). There is indeed a chi-rho coin of Constantius which has been the subject of a recent article, but it is considerably rarer than the Magnentian and Decentian pieces (Holt 2003; Kent 1981, Trier 332-6). This reverse type would provide the model for the chi-rho behind the head of Christ. However, it is interesting to see that two pomegranates have replaced the alpha and omega. The villa-owner may have wanted the inclusion of a reference to 'eternal life', commonly symbolised in the pagan world by the pomegranate.

On initial examination, the head of Magnentius and the head of Christ on the mosaic seem different, one being in profile and the other facing. Facing portraits on coins are extremely rare until the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, although a few were struck in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Such 4<sup>th</sup>-century pieces are not found in Britain, and none has a similar portrait to either the coin of Magnentius or the Hinton St Mary Christ. Conversely, so as to maintain symmetry, many mosaics depicted facing busts, with Medusa, Venus and the charioteer being excellent examples from villas such as Bignor and Rudston (Lysons 1817, pls. XVI, XXIX; Neal 1981, 104-5, pl. 69). At Hinton St Mary the portrait

<sup>1</sup> Department of Learning and Information, British Museum, London WC1B 3DG.



Fig. 1 — The entire mosaic from Hinton St Mary. Photo: © The British Museum.



Fig. 2 — The central roundel of the Hinton St Mary mosaic, showing Christ's head. Photo: © The British Museum.

of Christ in the centre had to be facing to maintain the balance of the design – there are four such figures in the angles.

Therefore, I would suggest that, for convenience, the mosaicist modelled the head of Christ on the bust of Magnentius from the coin. He already had the chi-rho on the reverse, so it made sense to use the head as well. When one looks closely at the two designs, there are striking similarities, as if the mosaicist has turned the coin portrait through 90 degrees: the drawing of the eyes with the lozenge shape, prominent eye-balls and single line eyebrow; the straight nose; the thick set neck with the pronounced chin. The mosaicist has interpreted the jowl of Magnentius in mirror image on the head of Christ; the hair has the same swept-back appearance with the straight fringe, and, on the left-hand side of Christ (as we look), the hair curls back onto the neck in a similar manner to that on the coin. Furthermore, most 4<sup>th</sup>-century coins depict the emperor with a headdress, normally a diadem, the bare head being unusually common on the coinage of Magnentius. The military-style cuirassed and draped bust is suitably adapted to present Christ wearing a *tunica* and *pallium* (Frend 1996, 351).

Unlike facing bust coins, the chi-rho series of Magnentius is quite common. I have identified several examples from site finds and its relative ubiquity is underlined by the fact that they were even copied by local forgers (Boon 1988, nos 147-8). The chance of a villa owner or mosaicist seeing one in Dorset was therefore quite high. Indeed, such a piece was found pierced in a grave at the Poundbury cemetery outside Dorchester (Watts 1991, 72) where more recent research has uncovered a chi-rho on a wall-painting in a tomb (Pearce 2003). This further attests the presence of Christians in the region at this time.



Fig. 3 — Bronze coin of Magnentius, struck at Amiens, showing bust of Magnentius on the obverse and chi-rho on the reverse (Kent 1981, Amiens 34; diameter 23 mm). Photo: © The British Museum.

If this interpretation is accepted, then it might help to date the mosaic more closely. The coin was struck in the last year of Magnentius' reign, AD 352-3 (the Constantius II issue followed briefly in 353), and probably circulated quite widely since it was, in effect, a pure bronze coin with no or minimal silver content. Coins with significant silver content tended to be hoarded and/or melted down. However, with the fall of Magnentius, it is probable that the chi-rho piece quickly left circulation, as reprisals against the supporters of Magnentius in Britain began under Paul 'The Chain' (Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, 14.5, 6-9). In conclusion, therefore, I believe that there is a good case for dating the laying of the Hinton St Mary mosaic to sometime around AD 353-5.

### Bibliography

- Boon, G. C. 1988. 'Counterfeit coins in Roman Britain' in J. Casey & R. Reece (eds), *Coins and the Archaeologist* (London).
- Frend, W. H. C. 1996. *The archaeology of early Christianity: a history* (London).
- Henig, M. 1995. *The art of Roman Britain* (London).
- Holt, W. C. 2003. 'The evidence of the coinage of Poemenius' revolt at Trier', *American Journal of Numismatics* 15, 61-76.
- Johns, C. 2000. 'Christianity in Roman Britain', *British Museum Magazine* (Spring 2000), 16-21.
- Kent, J. P. C. 1981. *The Roman imperial coinage, VIII: The family of Constantine I, 337-364* (London).
- Lysons, S. 1813. *Reliquiae Britannico-Romanae I* (London).
- Lysons, S. 1817. *Reliquiae Britannico-Romanae II* (London).
- Meates, G. W. 1979. *The Lullingstone Roman villa, Vol I: the site* (Maidstone).

- Meates, G. W. 1987. *The Lullingstone Roman villa, Vol 2: The wall paintings and finds* (Maidstone).
- Moorhead, T. S. N., 2000. 'An inspiration for the Hinton St Mary head of Christ?', *British Museum Magazine* (Spring 2000), 22-3.
- Neal, D. 1981. *Roman Mosaics in Britain*, Britannia Monograph 1 (London).
- Pearce, S. 2003. 'Imperial visions', *The Guardian* (17 May 2003).
- Toynbee, J. M. C. 1964. 'A new mosaic pavement found in Dorset', *Journal of Roman Studies* LIV, 7-14.
- Watts, D. 1991. *Christians and pagans in Roman Britain* (London/New York).