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

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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 associa-
tion 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
Magentius (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 pome-
granate.

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 5th century AD, although a few
were struck in the 4th century. Such 4th-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

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Fig. 1 — The entire mosaic from Hinton St Mary. 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 eyeballs 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 4th-century coins depict the emperor with a headress, 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.

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**


