

Explaining the Absence of Ceres on Augustan Coinage

There are no surviving examples of Augustan coinage that securely depict the goddess Ceres. Whether in conjunction with Augustus himself or with his wife, Livia, only a single coin series minted by the *triumvir monetalis* P. Petronius Turpulianus between 19-4 BCE includes Liber, or possibly Libera, and either the name or image of Augustus (e.g. RIC I no. 278, RIC I no. 282). The two Augustan coin types identified by Spaeth (1994: 100-101) cannot be securely identified as depicting Ceres or Libera. The lack of Ceres on Augustan coinage points to a gap between the messaging on the coins and messaging elsewhere, as Ceres and her partner deities Liber and Libera figure conspicuously on several prominent Augustan monuments. The most salient example is the Ara Pacis, dedicated in 9 BCE; vines and garlands occupy more than half of the surface of the enclosure (Zanker 1988: 179-83), and the central figure on the southeast panel shares many attributes with Ceres, though that goddess' identity has not been conclusively proven (Spaeth 1994: 66-68). In 7 CE altars to Ceres Mater and Ops Augusta were dedicated along the Vicus Jugarius, perhaps because of a famine (Dio 55.31.3) or as a way to honor Livia (Platner-Ashby 1929: 110). Furthermore, Ceres and her attributes are present on the coinage of every Julio-Claudian emperor who follows; by the reign of Claudius, Ceres has been fully co-opted into imperial iconography, particularly through association with Julio-Claudian women, and had been given the imperial attribute Augusta (RIC I no. 94).

The lack of Ceres, Liber, and Libera, and their associated attributes, are representative of the lingering tensions over Augustus' principate. In fact, the absence of Ceres on Augustan coinage is connected to the delayed reconstruction of the Temple of Ceres, Liber, and Libera, which had been destroyed in the fire of 31 BCE that damaged much of the region around the Circus Maximus

(Cass. Dio 50.10.3). The temple of Ceres had strong associations with both the plebeians and *libertas* dating back to its founding in 493 BCE after the first secession of the plebs (Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 6.94.3). Although Augustus took pride in his restoration of many of Rome's dilapidated temples (*RG* 19-20), the temple of Ceres was not rededicated until three years after Augustus' death (*Tac. Ann.* 2.49). This is an inordinately long period for construction of a temple, the upper limit of which was approximately 30 years (Stambaugh 1978: 564).

While Ceres had been used by the triumvirs (RRC 494/45) as a symbol of peace and reconciliation, Augustus met much hostility as princeps. A precarious domestic situation contributed to his long absence from Rome between 22-19, and no fewer than eight conspiracies against him are recorded by Cassius Dio in books 54-55, evidence that while Augustus had been victorious, acceptance of his reign was far from universal. Moneyers, as Levick has noted, such as Turpilianus were not propagandists, but chose designs that would appeal to their employer (2015: 108). Ceres, or more specifically, Liber, was closely associated with Antony. Augustus took great pains to avoid Antonian imagery or nomenclature in his imperial iconography and leaving the temple of a goddess associated with Antony was a political act (Fantham 2005: 221). Given Augustus' reticence to repair the temple, coinage that associated the emperor with his rival would be out of sync with Augustus' architectural messaging. Thus, Augustus' decision to delay the rebuilding of the temple of Ceres helps to explain the reason why Ceres, Liber, and Libera are absent from Augustan coinage: the lingering and widespread tension between the new regime and the last civil war.

Works Cited

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