

The First British Empire: Some Observations on the Coinage of Carausius AD 287 to 293

Duncan Russell

The early coins issued by the Usurper Carausius (AD 287 to 293), based in Britain at the end of the Third Century AD, provides some innovative and intriguing reverse designs. This double figured reverse of this early coin of Carausius (**Coin 1**) takes it's place amongst a number of coins proclaiming his triumphant arrival as Emperor amongst the British Provincials. Indeed, the EXPECTATE VENI legend of many of these Double Figure coins illustrates a surprising use of Virgil's Aeneid ('Come long awaited one') suggesting a familiarity with Classical Literature amongst the general population.

Coin 1 **Antoninianus of Carausius AD 287 to 293**

Obv: Radiate, draped and cuirassed bust of good style right.
(IMP CAR)AVSIVS PF AVG

Rev: Britannia / Roma / Virtus (?) standing left presenting Standard to Emperor standing right. Legend mostly illegible (II.....TS)?



Type similar to RIC Vol V Part 2 Nos 771 / 772, Unattributed Coins.

That Carausius' early coins provide support to his claim of legitimacy, following his usurpation of 'Imperial Authority', is not surprising. His need to demonstrate and augment the establishment of a successful Imperial Regime was a paramount concern. Therefore, his priority was to establish a controlling Monetary / Fiscal presence to legitimise his assumption of the mantle of Roman Emperor in Britain - Carausius' defacto power, based solely on his military command, was not enough to ensure lasting support and survival.

The initial creation of coinage in Carausius' own name was no mean feat. Apart from sporadic use of the mint at Lyon in the late 2nd Century; western mints were unknown until opened in the mid third century AD by Valerian and Gallienus. Following the creation of the breakaway Gallo-Roman Empire (Postumus and his successors AD 259 to 273) the available mints were expanded to include Lyon, Cologne and Milan. At the reintegration of the Gallo-Roman into the Central Empire by Aurelian (AD 270 to 275) only Lyon remained open as a functioning mint.

After the collapse of the Gallo-Roman Empire the British Province suffered an acute shortage of official coinage - a deficiency more than made up by the spurious Barbarous 'Radiate' coins that gained a degree of acceptance amongst the population. The ubiquity of these 'Radiates' as archaeological finds lends support to this conclusion.

By AD 287 it was imperative for Carausius to create a functioning Coining Authority. "**As a usurper his first priority was the production of a large quantity of coins bearing his name and portrait**" (N.Shiel. BAR 40 1977; page 167) However the initial pool of artisans, with the necessary skills to prepare dies and strike coinage, was clearly limited.

So this early phase of minting begs the question: '*Did the Usurping Authority make use of a Pool of Counterfeiters to kick start the process ?*' After all they had the experience and no doubt some a proficiency in creating passable copies. In the absence of an existing mint establishment such a solution to the immediate problem is, in all probability, the route taken by the Usurping Authorities.

George Boon in BAR 4 (1974) makes the point that the early coins the "*obverses tend to be superior to the reverses*" - as if "**the best engravers had been set to cut the obverse dies**"; this is clearly demonstrated by **Coin 1** above and **Coin 2** below. Additionally, in the majority of cases the "*long ...difficult ,certainly unusual name (i.e. CARAUSIUS) was engraved without error although the lettering might be rough*" (N.Shiel, BAR 40)

Coin 2 **Antoninianus of Carausius AD 287 to 293**

Obv: Radiate, draped and cuirassed bust right, IMP C(ARAV)SIVS PF AV (RIC Bust C Legend 6)

Rev: Mars in Military dress standing right, holding spear and leaning on shield. VIR - TV



RIC Vol V Part 2 No 1034 variety - Unattributed Mint

As Carausius' position seemed secure, following the defeat of the forces sent by Diocletian and Maximian in 289 AD to recover the British province, so too the quality of the coinage improved. The portraiture, the reverse style and lettering were of a consistently improved standard. The coinage included good silver denarii and a limited number of Aurei were also minted at Londinium, Colchester (?) and Rotomagus (Rouen) plus the elusive RSR Mint.

The coinage, following a tacit peace between Carausius and the central Roman Empire, saw the British Mints issuing coins of Diocletian and Maximian as well as Carausius - indeed there is the famous series of 'Triple bust' Antoniniani of Carausius and his Brothers (CARAVSIVS ET FRATES SVI). A more subtle reference to this parity of the Emperors is seen on **Coin 4**

The majority of Carausius's coinage features the Goddess PAX (Peace) (**Coin 3**) on the reverse; clearly an important factor emphasising benefits of the Emperor's rule. Other personifications include the Goddess Providentia (**as featured on Coin 4**) which, linked with the triple termination AVGGG represents the benefits accruing due to the rule of the three Augustii (Carausius, Diocletian and Maximian).

Coin 3 Antoninianus of Carausius AD 287 to 293.

- Obv: Radiate, draped and cuirassed bust right
IMP CARAVSIVS PF AVG - RIC Bust C; Legend 5.
Rev: Pax standing left with Olive branch and vertical sceptre,
PAX AVG in left field L with ML in exergue.



RIC Vol V Pt 2 No 101

Coin 4 Antoninianus of Carausius AD 287 to 293

Mint = Camulodunum (Colchester) or Clausentum (Bitterne, near Southampton).

- Obv: Radiate, draped and cuirassed bust right (RIC bust C; Legend 2)
IMP C CARAVSIVS P AVG
Rev: Providentia standing left holding Globe and Cornucopia
PROVID AVGGG SP in field with C in exergue



RIC Vol V Pt 2 No 368 Variety.

The triple termination GGG in the reverse denotes Carausius attempting to signal parity with the 'Legitimid' Emperors Diocletian and Maximianus. *For a discussion of this see Spinks Numismatic Circular Vol CXVII No 5 December 2009: "The Coinage of Carausius and his Colleagues" by R.J.*

Bourne. The Coin above illustrated as Figure A. In the article Variety 112 is cited but in fact it should read Variety 114.

Unfortunately for Carausius this peaceful interlude was abruptly ended following the loss of Northern France, due to a resurgent Central Empire determined to bring Britain to heel. Following the loss of the Classis Britannica's base at Gesoriacum or Bononia (Boulogne) in 292 AD, and further losses, Carausius was assassinated in 293 AD and his treasurer Allectus stepped into his place maintaining this First British Empire until 296 AD when Constantius Chlorus retook the Province. The famous Arras Gold Medallion commemorates the entry of Constantius into Londinium.

References:-

- British Archaeological Reports (BAR) 4 'Counterfeit Coins in Roman Britain' pp. 95 - 172 G.C.Boon (BAR 4 "Coins and the Archaeologist" Edited by J.Casey & R.Reece. 1974
- British Archaeological Reports (BAR) 40 'The Episode of Carausius and Allectus', Norman Shiel 1977
- Roman Imperial Coinage (RIC) Vol V Part 2 pp 426 to 570. 1972
- Spinks Numismatic Circular Vol CXVII No 5 December 2009: "The Coinage of Carausius and his Colleagues" by R.J. Bourne.

Note: All coins illustrated in the Authors Collection - The Arras Medallion in the Musee des Beaux-Arts, Arras. Electro-type copy in British Museum.

