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Chasing the Sun: Coinage and Solar Worship in the Roman Empire of the Third and Early Fourth Centuries CE

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ABSTRACT

The third and early fourth centuries CE were a challenging period for the Romans, with almost continuous warfare and over 50 emperors and pretenders between 235 and 285. The frequent appearance of the god Sol (the Sun) on coin reverses in this period is a marked departure from the standard range of religious motifs, which, it was once argued, attested a major shift away from the worship of Jupiter. This article catalogues and contextualises within current historiographical debates a group of coins, bearing images of Sol and solar iconography, in the collection of Canterbury Museum. Coinage was an important means of communication during the late Roman Imperial period, as evidenced by the increase in coin types and the speed with which coins were minted. The study of Sol's frequent appearance on coins, therefore, can tell us much about the religious and political situation in the third and early fourth centuries CE, an important period for which there is limited literary evidence.

KEYWORDS

Sol; Coins; Aurelian; Constantine; Rome.

INTRODUCTION

> 'Convinced, she now contracts her vast design,
> And all her triumphs shrink into a coin…
> The medal, faithful to its charge of fame,
> Through climes and ages bears each form and name:
> In one short view subjected to our eye
> Gods, emperors, heroes, sages, beauties, lie.'
>
> – Alexander Pope[1]

In the eighteenth century Alexander Pope perhaps best summed up the potency and relevance of coinage, particularly for studies of ancient civilisations. For the Romans, coinage was *charged* with carrying the fame of the emperors and their deeds, and stood the test of time more successfully than many temples, statues or reliefs. Pope also touched on another point that makes coinage invaluable; its ability to represent people and events on an incredibly small scale – Rome and her glory contracted so that it could fit in the palm of the hand and be carried over mountains and across seas. With a glance and a flick of a coin, viewers saw *gods, emperors, heroes, sages, beauties,* small but clear, and understood that these images were a reflection of the Empire in which they lived. Whether these images were realistic reflections of the state of affairs in the Empire, or idealistic expectations of how life should or could be, they still tell us much about those who minted and used the coins.

The research undertaken in this study was inspired by an unpublished collection of Roman Imperial coins housed in Canterbury Museum, a significant number of which date to the third century CE and display images of the Roman sun god, Sol, or solar iconography. Because the period of the third and early fourth centuries was a particularly turbulent one in Roman history, coins are essential evidence as they continued to be produced even when the construction of large-scale buildings and public works had ceased. The images on coins, though miniature, are expressive and often of high quality, and for a number of third-century emperors coins furnish the only surviving portraits. The discussion herein examines the importance of coins during the political upheaval of the third century CE and puts a number of the coins from Canterbury Museum into context. This discussion also accounts for the exceptionally frequent appearance of Sol on Roman coinage of the third century CE. In Roman antiquity Sol was one of the few visible gods whose effects were felt by all of humanity; his chariot drew the sun up into the sky by day, and down again at night. Given the power of the sun to support or destroy life, it is not difficult to understand why ancient (agriculturally based) cultures worshipped the sun in some form, or why Sol was often represented in art and literature. The reasons why Sol was so popular on the coinage of Roman emperors, and in context of political and military upheaval, are far less obvious and require investigation.

The coins in Canterbury Museum's collection depicting Sol or solar iconography can tell us a number of things about the god, coinage in general, and the emperors under whom the coins were minted. During this investigation, 162 coins displaying Sol or solar iconography were examined in detail. In this study I have included only the most well-preserved and pertinent examples of this coinage. Some coins highlight the traditional iconography of Sol, which remained virtually unchanged for three centuries. Others carry clear messages of authority and eternity linked with the emperor, whose portrait was invariably on the obverse (or in common parlance, the head) of the coin. Information and ideas were conveyed through the legends on both sides of the coins, through depictions of the emperor interacting with the god directly, or through the emperor adopting attributes and stances common to Sol, such as the radiate crown and raised right hand. The art of coins may be considered a language of images that, when *read,* give insight into the messages and impressions that Roman emperors wished to leave.

THE SUN ON ROMAN COINS

Early (and influential) scholars posited that Rome had been home to two different sun gods in its history, Sol Indiges and Sol Invictus, with the former replaced by the latter in the third century CE. According to this theory it was a matter of East versus West: the Syrian Sol Invictus superseding the Roman Sol Indiges.[2] This process was thought to be possible because the Republican Sol was a minor deity whose worship was unworthy of the *superior* Romans, and because mystery cults with Eastern antecedents did increase in popularity in the Imperial period.[3] Finally, when faced with the leadership crises and civil wars of the third century, some Romans worshipped the old gods with more devotion, but many turned to the new gods whose worship, scholars once thought, was spread through the Empire with soldiers and others from the eastern provinces.[4] Gaston Halsberghe argued that when the emperor Elagabalus introduced his black baetyl (conical sacred stone) from Emesa as the sacred image of his god, Elagabal, and Aurelian established his great temple to Sol Invictus in Rome, they were the same god: an eastern deity whose monotheistic-like worship foreshadowed Rome's acceptance of Christianity.[5] Halsberghe further argued that the Sol evident in literature and visual representations from an earlier period was replaced by this new solar deity, and used an apparent decline in solar monuments – especially coins – in the first two centuries CE as evidence to support these claims.[6]

More recently scholars have challenged Halsberghe's views and have argued that Sol never completely disappeared from monuments or coins. For example, the imagery of Sol and Apollo had become so interchangeable by the Augustan period (31 BCE - 14 CE) that both gods could be understood as manifestations of the sun and referred to in the same monument. In this way Sol continued to be represented in a typically Graeco-Roman way on a variety of monuments throughout the Imperial period. It is thus more likely that Sol continued as a common Roman deity alongside the Emesene Elagabal, and that it was

Sol whom Aurelian chose as his patron, not the eastern deity. In his 2008 thesis, Ragnar Hedlund argued that the popularity of images of Sol on coins in the third century CE was not due to his sudden introduction to Rome from the East, but rather to his adoption by several emperors as their protector and as a symbol of hope and the eternity of the Empire.[7] There is, in fact, very little evidence for the idea of an eastern Sol superseding a Roman Sol, and that which is available from coins, inscriptions, statuary and reliefs indicates that Sol was continuously worshipped in Rome.[8] To support this theory of one Roman Sol worshipped throughout the Imperial period we can highlight the recognisable nature of the god's iconography, as it is clear that Sol was represented visually as a Graeco-Roman god.[9] As evidenced by the coins discussed below (for example, Figs 6, 7, 8, 9 and 12), Sol is always either nude or wearing a *chiton* (tunic) or *chlamys* (a cloak or cape). He often carries a globe or whip, he is usually radiate, and is most often shown in a *quadriga* (a four-horsed chariot) or merely standing. There is nothing in these attributes or poses to suggest specifically eastern origins. Sol's appearance is traditionally Graeco-Roman, with little resemblance to other well-known deities from eastern provinces, and from the earliest coins depicting Sol to the latest, this iconography changes very little.[10]

SOLAR WORSHIP IN EARLY-IMPERIAL ROME

The sun and its movements were extremely important to the inhabitants of ancient Italy, who were mostly farmers.[11] Solar worship occurred there from an early period and played a significant role in religious life, but Sol was much more than an agricultural god. As the Romans came into contact with cultures that had sophisticated solar theology, they themselves began to view Sol as a metaphorical expression of power and authority. The Republican temple of Sol in the Circus Maximus attests to the growing importance of the god. This temple is thought to have been located in the stands of the Circus on the south side by the Aventine Hill, and to have been adorned with a prominent statue of Sol on the roof. The cult of Sol was connected with circuses from a very early date; indeed, legend has it that the first circus games were held by Circe in honour of her father, Sol.[12] The exact date when the temple was first built is unknown, but a connection between the sun and circuses is visible on Etruscan mirrors dated to the late fourth or third century BCE, and it is certain that there was a temple in the Circus Maximus by the late first century BCE.[13] Rome had at least four sanctuaries or temples for Sol, not including those for non-Roman solar deities, and at least two of these were founded in the Republican period (c. 509 BCE - 31 BCE) or earlier.[14] Devotion to the sun was evident in the Republican period but grew in importance in the Imperial period (31 BCE - c 337 CE) under various emperors who identified Sol as their patron and protector.[15] It is significant that the largest numbers of surviving images of Sol are on Roman coinage of all periods because coinage was one of the most accessible, mobile and manageable visual media in the Roman world. Coins were easily transported and necessary for the transactions of daily life, and because they passed through the hands of almost every Roman, Sol's images depicted on coins were, potentially, as meaningful as they were far-reaching.

Augustus, the first Roman emperor (r 31 BCE - 14 CE), showed a keen interest in solar religion and set up an obelisk from Egypt in the Circus Maximus.[16] Obelisks were great symbols of Egyptian sun worship, and were commonly found in areas dedicated to the sun. Moreover, given that one of the most common ways of representing Sol was in his *quadriga*, as the triumphant charioteer, his presence in the Circus Maximus is unexceptional. The course of the chariots around the *spina* (the backbone, or central ridge) was compared with the course of the heavenly bodies around the sun, and an obelisk, as a symbol of a sunbeam, was the perfect centrepiece to this race.[17] The inscription that Augustus added to the obelisk makes its solar function in Rome clear:

> '*…Imperator Augustus, son of Divine Caesar…dedicated this obelisk to the sun, when Egypt had been brought under the sway of the Roman people.*'[18]

Obelisks, and by extension the sun, were thus an expression of a ruler's power, but the cyclical nature of the sun also made it a potent symbol of the stability and eternal nature of Rome and her rulers. From a very early stage, the emperor Augustus associated himself with Apollo and portrayed himself as his protégé.[19] Dreams and omens reported in ancient sources associate the young Octavian with the sun and stars. According to tradition, on his entry into Rome

the people noticed a halo around the sun, heralding a new *Golden Age* presided over by Octavian, who had by then acquired the title *Augustus* (revered one).[20] By conquering Egypt, Octavian was able to appropriate Sol and the power of the sun, which was important for emphasising his victory over Cleopatra and Antony. Apollo also appears on eight different coin types under Augustus, and this trend is continued by later emperors, who chose to portray Apollo on their coinage in some way.[21] But solar worship was clearly represented in Roman religion from an early date, and the sun's connection with ideas of kingship and authority also helps to explain why worship and recognition of Sol increased in the Imperial period, when one man claimed authority to rule over a vast Empire and its people.

Coinage supplies clear evidence for an early established cult of the sun in Rome, and the Sol shown on these coins is iconographically identical to the Sol on coins from the third and early fourth centuries CE, such as those in the collection of Canterbury Museum. As a bust or driving a *quadriga*, Sol is continuously present on coins from 132 BCE to the beginning of the first century CE.[22] Because the sun was a powerful symbol of authority and kingship, solar gods were often used to represent these ideas in art and monuments dedicated by emperors. For example, Augustus chose Apollo as his patron deity and dedicated monuments to Apollo in his solar guise.[23] Sol and Luna (goddess of the moon) together signified *aeternitas* (eternity), so that when they were depicted together they conveyed the idea of stability and longevity, which were important concepts for Augustus in establishing himself as sole ruler.[24] Perhaps the other emperor most famous (or infamous) for solar affinities before the third century was Nero, who ruled from 54-68 CE. On cameos and coins, and most notriously in a colossal statue at his lavish urban villa, Nero was depicted wearing the radiate crown, which (as will be discussed below) linked him both to Augustus and his patron, solar Apollo. Sol continued as a presence in art and on coinage throughout the second and early third centuries CE. While emperors of the second century did not associate themselves with Sol as closely as Augustus and Nero had, the god's presence was still visible in Rome on coinage and in the colossus that continued to stand well into the third century, when Sol became associated with military victories, particularly in the East.[25]

SOL IN THE THIRD AND EARLY FOURTH CENTURIES CE

The third century CE has traditionally been characterised as a time of crisis, in which Rome was threatened by invasions, famine, plague, economic troubles, and at least fifty-four men claiming to be emperor within 72 years.[26] Almost all the emperors in the third century, from Caracalla to Diocletian, faced threats to their rule, both internally and externally, which stretched their resources and forced Rome into a state of near-constant warfare. As the third century progressed, this situation intensified and the importance of Rome waned in comparison to that of other provincial centres. Emperors spent the majority of their reigns on campaign, with little time or money for constructing monuments and holding celebrations in Rome which, in previous centuries, was an established way of demonstrating power. Thus military necessity caused new cities to become centres of Imperial activity.[27] As Herodian explains, power was centred very much in the person of the emperor, wherever he was, and this was usually in border regions from northern Italy to Sirmium, the Danube, Thrace, Byzantium, Bithynia, and through Asia Minor to Antioch.[28] With so many claimants to the throne and usurpers, the need to legitimise his rule was vital for any new emperor if he wished to maintain power.[29] This is evident from the coinage, which indicates that even those emperors who were in power for a year or less, such as Gordian I and Gordian II, Balbinus, Pupienus, and Aemilian, had coins minted bearing their image and achievements of their reign that they wished to emphasize.[30] A sestertius of Gordian I (Fig 1), whose coinage is rare in general, depicts the thin features of the emperor. The reverse shows Fides (Loyalty) standing and holding a standard and a sceptre, with the legend FIDES MILITVM SC (loyalty of the soldiers). There is nothing unusual about depicting the emperor or Fides in this way, and yet the fact that Gordian I and Gordian II only ruled for three weeks indicates how quickly coins were minted for emperors.[31]

Because of the turbulent situation during the third century, it was necessary for emperors to portray their right to rule *as well as* the qualities that made them effective rulers wherever they could. In this way coins became a key medium of communication throughout this century, through the inter-relationship of images

Fig 1: Sestertius of Gordian I/II (238 CE)
Diameter: 30.8mm
Obverse: IMP CAES M ANT GORDIANVS AFR, Laureate draped bust, facing right.
Reverse: FIDES MILITVM SC, Fides standing facing left, holding standard in right hand and sceptre in left.
Canterbury Museum 1994.223

Fig 2: Antoninianus of Gallienus (253-268 CE)
Diameter: 22.9mm
Obverse: GALLIENVS AVG, Radiate bust, facing left.
Reverse: VICTORIA AVG, Victory facing left, holding palm branch and diadem.
Canterbury Museum 1994.265

Fig 3: Antoninianus of Gallienus (253-268 CE)
Diameter: 21.5mm
Obverse: IMP GALLIENVS AVG, Radiate bust, facing right.
Reverse: FORT REDVX, Fortuna seated facing left, holding palm branch and sceptre.
Canterbury Museum 1994.274

Fig 4: Antoninianus of Postumus (259-268 CE)
Diameter: 22.1mm
Obverse: IMP POSTVMVS AVG, Radiate draped bust, facing right.
Reverse: FIDES AEQUIT, Fides seated, facing left, holding standard and patera (?).
Canterbury Museum 1994.303

Fig 5: Dupondius of Elagabalus (218-222 CE)
Diameter: 26mm
Obverse: IMP CAES M AVR ANTONINVS PIVS AVG, Radiate draped bust, facing right.
Canterbury Museum 1994.191

Fig 6: Antoninianus of Aurelian (270-275 CE)
Diameter: 23.5mm
Obverse: IMP C AVRELIANVS AVG, Radiate cuirassed bust, facing right.
Reverse: ORIENS AVG, Sol with globe in left hand, right hand outstretched, with captive at his feet.
Canterbury Museum 1994.340

on the obverse and reverse. The image on the obverse was usually a portrait of the emperor, while the image on the reverse, according to Andrew Burnett, illustrated (explicitly or implicitly) why the emperor was an object of such focus.[32] It is clear from the images and legends portrayed on coins that they were meant to be noticed, and emperors used this expectation to convey the message of their own *auctoritas* and the divine support and protection that they enjoyed. Not a great deal is known about the organization of mints and who, in the end, was responsible for the choice of images depicted on coins; however, it is clear that coins were under state control and as such should be considered official sources.[33]

Coins comprise the largest body of surviving evidence for the *soldier-emperors* (emperors of the third century who came from military backgrounds) and the images on both sides were part of a *language* of ideas, values and symbols available to these emperors for legitimising their rule.[34] Coins were, effectively, a dialogue between the emperor and his people, expressing the intentions and expectations of both parties.[35] Coinage did not constitute a monumental achievement in the same way that the erection of statues, arches and temples did. In its ability to convey messages, however, coinage was more subtle and pervasive. Coins were, by the third century, a necessity of life used in everyday business transactions and payment, and particularly for payment of the army. They were commonplace, and yet the images on coins changed as each new emperor minted new types to display his own portrait and titles. This was particularly true in the third century, when emperors ruled for such short periods of time and there was a decline in the construction of grand structures.[36] It is entirely plausible that this decline led to a greater reliance on the imagery of coinage to communicate and advertise the emperor's achievements. In this respect, coins were a different kind of monument, designed not so much to impress, but rather to circulate and infiltrate the Empire with reminders of the emperor and the qualities he possessed. Coins also acted as a memorial to emperors and their reigns since they continued to circulate long after the emperor in question had died.[37] Unless he suffered a systematic condemnation of his memory through destruction of his portraits and name (*damnatio memoriae*), the image and virtues of the emperor remained visible throughout the Empire.

One of the ways in which emperors chose to communicate their authority and military skill was to display martial images on coin reverses, represented by deities and personifications that signified victory, security, eternity and the invincibility of the emperor and Empire.[38] An antoninianus of Gallienus (Fig 2) shows the radiate emperor on the obverse, and Victory on the reverse, holding a palm branch and diadem.

By having Victory portrayed on the reverse of his coins, the radiate Gallienus not only used solar symbolism but also aligned himself with the goddess of victory in the eyes of the viewer. The same can be said of the following antoniniani (Figs 3 and 4), which show Fortuna (Fortune) on the reverse of a coin of Gallienus, and Fides (Loyalty) on the reverse of a coin of Postumus. These coins served to link the image of the emperor with the virtues portrayed, inviting the viewer to associate the obverse image of the emperor with the reverse image of the virtue.[39]

These personified virtues were intended to reassure the people during this era of military and political turbulence, and also to maintain the loyalty of the legions. Despite the fact that the army chose the majority of emperors of the third century, coin imagery suggests that divine approval was still important once a contender had been proclaimed emperor.[40] This divine support was visually expressed in a number of ways: by depicting a god on coins, either alone or with the emperor, in the role of protector or patron; by portraying the emperor as a *sacerdos* (priest) of a god; by showing the emperor in the guise of the god, dressed as or carrying attributes of a specific deity; or by associating the reigning emperor with past deified emperors through recognisable attributes and deities.[41] So, for example, in the chaos that followed Severus Alexander's death (235 CE) and the struggles of the ensuing years, there was a marked decline in the construction, repair and votive dedications of the traditional cults.[42] Images and symbols of a religious nature became more common on the coins after 235 CE, with specific deities, and a wider range of deities, appearing more frequently than in previous centuries.[43] The increase in religious coin types shows that for these warring emperors, always on the move, coins were a necessary and useful medium for communicating their religious policies and personal religious preferences.

In order to bolster support for their tenuous hold on power, emperors of the third century relied on traditional gods whose symbolism and iconography were easily recognised and understood. Sol seems to have suited this purpose, along with Jupiter, Hercules and Mars, and was used accordingly. Given the need for the appearance of strength and stability during these years, and the negative response to the introduction of gods such as Elagabal, it is understandable that these emperors chose to promote traditional Roman gods. Sol appears to have been a god who could cross cultural boundaries, and could visually connect the emperor with the sun as a deity for both Romans and non-Romans. For this reason Sol was a more effective means for emperors to express the idea of unity to an Empire in turmoil.

The first third-century emperor to show marked devotion to a solar god was Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, also known as Elagabalus (r 218 - 222 CE) (see Fig 5).[44]

According to Cassius Dio, Elagabalus' reign was one of debauchery and stereotypically *eastern* excess, characterised by his devotion to the god Elagabal, and the power of his mother and grandmother, who effectively ruled through him.[45] Sacrifices took place at sunrise, which was appropriate for a solar deity who made his first appearance at dawn.[46] According to Herodian, Elagabalus built a great temple to Elagabal on the Palatine and put statues of other Roman gods into it in order to subjugate the traditional Roman deities to Elagabal.[47] The ancient historians convey a one-sided and largely negative view of Elagabal and the way in which he was perceived by Romans. When Elagabalus was assassinated and suffered *damnatio memoriae*, so did his god. His successor, Severus Alexander, returned Jupiter Optimus Maximus to his place as supreme god in the Roman pantheon. It is clear that Elagabal and Sol Invictus were different gods, the former of eastern origins, and the latter worshipped in Rome from the early Republic.[48]

It was this older Sol that reappears in the ancient literary sources that describe the life of the emperor Aurelian (r 270-275 CE), who encouraged the worship of Sol Invictus and promoted the idea that he himself was vice-regent of the sun god, his representative on earth.[49] At this time Sol Invictus was recognised as an official deity of the Roman state, with his own priest (a *flamen*) and an annual festival inserted into the religious calendar. The great temple of Sol in Rome, famous for the richness of its offerings and dedications, was begun in 274 CE when Aurelian returned to the city to celebrate his triumph over Palmyra and Postumus' Gallic Empire.[50] His devotion to Sol was neither sudden nor surprising, since his home province, Lower Moesia on the Danube River, had long worshipped the sun.[51] Aurelian's campaigns in the East, and his interaction with eastern solar cults, further supported his desire to reinvigorate sun worship in Rome, since he ascribed his victory over the Palmyrenes to the intervention of Sol, and restored the temple of a local Syrian sun god after his legionaries plundered and destroyed it.[52] After Aurelian's final suppression of Palmyra in 272 CE there was a notable shift in emphasis in mints around the Empire, and Sol began to supplant Jupiter as the emperor's divine sponsor.[53] While Aurelian did not attempt to destroy the worship of other gods, or promote Sol as a supreme god, it is clear that Sol was his special protector and patron, and his monuments and coinage attest to this. For example, a coin from the reign of Aurelian bears the image of the radiate emperor on the obverse, and Sol standing holding a globe, with a captive at his feet on the reverse, and the reverse legend ORIENS AVG (dawn or rising of Aurelian) (Fig 6).[54]

This coin may be interpreted as Aurelian reasserting his power in the eastern Empire through his military victories, and doing so with the support of his divine patron Sol (compare also with Fig 8). In this example, the term 'Oriens' may be a deliberate pun refering to the dawn of Aurelian and his rule and the setting of the 'east' in defeat.

After Aurelian's death in 275, Sol's presence on coinage waned under the Tetrarchs, apart from a brief resurgence under Probus (r 276-282 CE), who minted a large number of Sol coin types.[55] However, the legacy of this solar worship may be seen in the reign of Constantine, who continued this devotion to Sol when he became emperor in 312 CE, a fact that is evident from the coinage of his reign.[56] Whether because of religious devotion, or simply because he wanted to differentiate himself from the Tetrarchs, the coinage of Constantine displayed many Sol types during his early years, and the god remained popular on coins even

Fig 7: Aes of Constantine I (307-337 CE)
Diameter: 20.6mm
Obverse: IMP CONSTANTINVS AVG, Laureate cuirassed bust, facing right.
Reverse: SOLI INVICTO COMITI, Sol facing left, right arm outstretched, globe in left hand.
Canterbury Museum 1994.465

Fig 8: Antoninianus of Aurelian (270-275 CE)
Diameter: 21.7mm
Obverse: IMP AVRELIANVS AVG, Radiate cuirassed bust, facing right.
Reverse: ORIENS AVG, Sol with globe in left hand, right hand outstretched, placing foot on one of two captives at feet.
Canterbury Museum 1994.341

Fig 9: Sestertius of Severus Alexander (222-235 CE)
Diameter: 29.6mm
Obverse: IMP ALEXANDER PIVS AVG, Laureate bust, facing right.
Reverse: PM TRP XIII COS III PP SC, Sol advancing, holding whip in left hand, right hand outstretched.
Canterbury Museum 1994.205

Fig 10: Antoninianus of Probus (276-282 CE)
Diameter: 22.6mm
Obverse: IMP C M AVR PROBVS AVG, Radiate bust, facing right.
Reverse: CLEMENTIA TEMP, Probus standing right, receiving globe from Jupiter holding thunderbolt.
Canterbury Museum 1994.355

Fig 11: As of Maximianus (286-310 CE)
Diameter: 23.9mm
Obverse: IMP MAXIMIANVS PF AVG, Radiate draped bust, facing right.
Reverse: IOVI CONSERVAT AVG, Jupiter standing facing left, holding thunderbolt in right hand, and sceptre in left.
Canterbury Museum 1994.390

Fig 12: As of Licinius (308-324 CE)
Diameter: 20.9mm
Obverse: IMP LICINIVS PF AVG, Laureate cuirassed bust, facing right.
Reverse: SOLI INVICTO COMITI, Sol standing facing left with chlamys, holding globe in left hand, right hand outstretched
Canterbury Museum 1994.429

after Christianity was adopted as the official religion of the Empire.[57] The importance of solar theology during the reign of Constantine has been determined by examining the physical remains, especially coins, which frequently bore images or inscriptions mentioning the sun god (for example, Fig 7).

Not since Aurelian had there been a comparably extensive use of Sol. In Rome, Constantine's triumphal arch clearly referred to the emperor's relationship with Sol, with a radiate bust of the god in the east bay, and a small statue of Sol in the historical frieze on the west side of the arch.[58] Sol and Luna are represented in two roundels on the east and west sides of the arch, with Sol rising from the ocean in his *quadriga* and Luna descending in her *biga.*[59] Nor was solar imagery restricted to Rome. In Constantinople, a radiate statue of the emperor was placed on top of a column in the new forum to mark the dedication of Constantine's new capital, suggesting perhaps, that Constantine was a radiant ruler with a solar deity as protector.[60] After Constantine, Sol's depiction on coinage declined significantly, though he would make a brief resurgence under the emperor Julian.[61] The longevity of solar worship in Rome and the consistency with which Sol was chosen as patron deity indicates the close association he had with Imperial power.

THE ICONOGRAPHY ON COINAGE

To understand why Sol appears so frequently on coins of the third and early fourth centuries CE, it is necessary to explore his iconography and its possible meanings. The iconography used to represent Sol visually was established by the first century BCE and was comprehensible and easily recognisable, distinguishing Sol from other solar deities while communicating his nature and domain. The most common attributes of Sol were his crown, *quadriga*, whip, globe, and cloak. A number of gestures or actions also appeared, such as raising the right hand, trampling enemies, and handing a globe to the emperor. Scholars have divided depictions of Sol into three general categories: Sol shown as a bust, Sol in a *quadriga*, and Sol standing or striding. These three categories all display similar elements of solar iconography, but the differences between them are telling and serve to highlight the god's various attributes and spheres of influence, which are the sun, eternity, invincibility, and stability. The bust image type has the fewest attributes because the primary focus was on the head of the deity; however, this focus of attention means that the attributes that are depicted are some of the most important and recognisable of the god's symbols. Sol as a bust is always depicted radiate. The rays shown emanating from Sol's head are clearly a reference to his solar nature, symbolizing both natural and divine light, as he is both a personification of the sun and a deity. Often the busts of Sol appear with some sort of cloak, and he is always depicted as young and beardless, with thick, loose locks.[62] The *quadriga* image type usually allows for a representation of Sol in full, with the radiate crown and cloak, either hanging down his back or flying out behind him, and often carrying a whip in his left hand with his right hand outstretched. In myth Sol is mentioned together with his chariot and *'eager tramping steeds',* and these coins are visual representations of his role as cosmic charioteer, riding across the sky scattering darkness and bringing light.[63] The whip used to spur the horses is another attribute of this role of charioteer. All three representational types for Sol appear on third century coins; however, the standing/striding Sol is the most common and is the only type represented by the coins in Canterbury Museum.[64] While in the standing/striding pose, Sol was often depicted holding a globe, usually in his left hand and with his right hand raised (Fig 8), but sometimes he was shown holding a whip, as in a well-preserved sestertius of Severus Alexander (r 222-235 CE) (Fig 9).

The globe was an important and recognisable symbol in ancient art, and it was originally used by the Greeks as a teaching device for lessons in astronomy and astrology.[65] For the Romans, it was a symbol of the power of the emperors, bestowed by the gods.[66] Scenes on coins that depicted Jupiter or Sol handing a globe to the emperor are understood as the god giving power to the emperor. This can be seen on an antoninianus of Probus (Fig 10) that shows Jupiter holding his thunderbolt and handing a globe to the emperor.

Sol's increased importance is evident when we consider that often in the third century, it was Sol who handed the globe to the emperor, a role which had, up to this time, been reserved for Jupiter. In this way Sol was seen as entrusting his cosmic power to the emperor, making him ruler of the cosmos.[67] Even his stance when

Fig 13: Antoninianus of Probus (276-282 CE)
Diameter: 22.8mm
Obverse: IMP C PROBVS P F AVG, Radiate cuirassed bust, facing right.
Canterbury Museum 1994.361

Fig 14: Antoninianus of Probus (276-282 CE)
Diameter: 24mm
Obverse: VIRTVS PROBI AVG, Radiate helmeted, cuirassed bust, with spear and shield, facing left.
Canterbury Museum 1994.359

standing and holding a globe or whip recalls Jupiter standing holding a spear and thunderbolt (Fig 11, cf Fig 12).

Sol was also depicted trampling captives, which gave the scene a martial quality and suggested that Sol, and by extension the emperor, was or would be the triumphant victor (see Fig 8).

The emperors of the third and early fourth centuries who favoured Sol did so because he represented something that they believed was powerful, universal, eternal or, at the very least, useful to their visual programme. Given Sol's appearance on coins at an early stage and the frequency of his presence on coins in the third century, it appears that emperors in this period used his image and his attributes in much the same way that they did those of Jupiter, Mars, and Hercules. A solar symbol often worn by emperors was the radiate crown, although the emperors' radiate crown revealed slight differences to the crown worn by Sol. Sol was never depicted with a nimbus without rays, or with a radiate crown with *lemnisci* (ribbons), while the emperor's crown was always depicted with ribbons that secured the fillet around the head. The ribbons show that the crown worn by the emperor was a real object, whereas Sol's crown was an indicator of divine light.[68] Two antoniniani of Probus (Figs 13 and 14) show the Imperial crown attached by *lemnisci,* with the first antoninianus showing on the obverse a bust of the emperor, cuirassed and wearing the radiate crown (Fig 13). In this image Probus is clearly portrayed as the 'soldier-emperor' serving alongside his troops.

This second antoninianus shows the cuirassed emperor wearing a helmet and radiate crown, and carrying a spear and shield (Fig 14). The legend reads VIRTVS PROBI AVG (the excellence of Probus Augustus) which, when taken together with the image, portrays Probus as the concerned emperor, fighting alongside his men and possessing the *virtus* of a *good* ruler.

Sol and the radiate crown thus became available to emperors as part of a language of images with the capacity to convey messages of authority, power, divine support and links to Augustus and the *Pax Romana* (Roman peace). As a personification of the sun and a symbol of eternity, Sol was useful to emperors of the third century CE because their tenuous hold on power required support from a deity, especially one favoured by previous *good* emperors. The association between emperor and god was spread effectively on coinage, where both the emperor and deity were depicted on the same medium.

The coins of the third century were not merely currency, but were also 'monuments' of an Imperial authority that was under threat due to the pressures facing the Roman Empire at this time. The emperors of the third century had little time while on campaign to dedicate temples and hold triumphs, and coins,

though less spectacular, were a practical way for them to celebrate the achievements of their reigns. The solar iconography of Roman coinage is a subject that can shed much light on the religious and political situation in the Roman Empire during this time. This study places the third-fourth century coins with solar imagery in Canterbury Museum's collection into their historical context. The images of Sol on these coins emphasised the god's role as cosmic charioteer and invincible bringer of light, eternal and predictable, and cast him as a powerful and comforting symbol during a time when so much was uncertain and the face of the Empire was changing forever.

END NOTES:

[1]Alexander Pope, Epistle V: To Mr. Addison - Occasioned by his Dialogues on Medals. In Alexander Pope edited by Pat Rogers, 174-176, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

[2] Wissowa 1912, 365; Halsberghe 1972, 35 and 54.

[3] Hijmans 2009, 7; Beard, North and Price 2000, 246-247.

[4] Leppin 2007, 96.

[5] Halsberghe 1972, 130; Turcan 2000 a, 176-177.

[6] Halsberghe 1972, 37.

[7] Hedlund 2008, 190-191.

[8] Hijmans 2009, 24.

[9] Hijmans 2009, 93; Hedlund 2008, 191.

[10] Hijmans 2009, 72.

[11] Halsberghe 1972, 33; see also Von Domaszewski 1909, 173; and Altheim 1941, 24-25.

[12] Tertullian *De Spectaculis* 8; Bell 2007, 167.

[13] Humphrey 1986, 91; Bell 2007, 167; Richardson 1992, 365.

[14] Hijmans 2009, 483. The two temples believed to have been established in the Republic are a Pulvinar Sol mentioned by Quintilian (1.7.12), and the temple in the Circus Maximus; Richardson 1992, 322 and 365.

[15] Fears 1987, 408.

[16] Humphrey 1986, 94.

[17] Roullet 1972, 43; Futrell 2006, 76-77.

[18] 'IMP CAESAR DIVI F AVGVSTVS PONTIFEX MAXIMVS IMP XII COS XI TRIB POT XIV AEGVPTO IN POTESTATEM POPVLI ROMANI REDACTA SOLI DONVM DEDIT' (*CIL* 6.701 Reprinted in *ILS* 91) In Iversen 1968, 65; Quinn Schofield 1969, 648.

[19] Zanker 1988, 44.

[20] Suetonius *Augustus* II 94-95; Zanker 1988, 47-48.

[21] According to an analysis of coin types in the RIC, Vol I-VII, Apollo types appear on coins of Domitian, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Commodus, Pescennius Niger, Septimius Severus, Caracalla, Maximinus, Gordian III, Philip I, Trajan Decius, Hostilian, Trebonianus Gallus, Volusian, Aemilian, Valerian, Gallienus, Claudius II, Quintillus, Aurelian, Postumus.

[22] Coins L1-1-14, Hijmans 2009, 411-415.

[23] Zanker 1988, 49, 50.

[24] Hijmans 2009, 563.

[25] A coin type of Trajan, minted between 114-117 CE, with a bust of Sol on the reverse, commemorates his Parthian campaign with the legend, PARTHICO PMTRPCOSVIPPSPQR (*RIC* Vol II, Trajan 326-329). Cf Rowan 2009, 306.

[26] Figure taken from Maximinus I (235-238 CE) until Constantine I (307-337 CE).

[27] Millar 2001, 43-44.

[28] Herodian I.6.5: 'Furthermore, Rome is where the emperor is.'; Millar 2001, 44.

[29] Manders 2012, 25 and 28.

[30] See Duncan-Jones 2005, 461, on the importance of the Imperial image and the speed with which images of new emperors were spread throughout the Empire.

[31] Carson 1990, 77.

[32] Burnett 1987, 69.

[33] Noreňa 2011 a, 249; Cheung 1998, 53.

[34] Hedlund 2008, 231; Hannestad 1988, 11; Zanker 1988, 3.

[35] Hannestad 1988, 12.

[36] A number of bath complexes were built by various emperors, and Aurelian built walls around Rome; however, in comparison to previous centuries, construction of monuments in Rome declined in this period.

[37] Cheung 1998, 56-57.

[38] Hedlund 2008, 91.

[39] Noreňa 2001, 152-153.

[40] Hedlund 2008, 234.

[41] Manders 2012, 41ff; De Blois 2006, 274-275; Fears 1977, 259-260.

[42] Fowden 2005, 556; De Blois 2002, 215.

[43] Manders 2012, 95.

[44] Southern 2001, 58.

[45] *Dio's Roman History* 80.11.1-2; Herodian II.5.4-9.

[46] *Dio's Roman History* 79.31.1; Scriptores Historia Augustae *Vita Antoninus Heliogabalus* 1-2.4; Herodian II.5.8-9. See also Beard, North and Price 2000, 256.

[47] II.5.8-9; Scriptores Historia Augustae *Vita Antoninus Heliogabalus.* 2.4-5.2.

[48] Hijmans 2009, 1.

[49] Watson 1999, 188.
[50] Zosimus' *Historia Nova* I.61; Grant 1985, 184, 187; Turcan 2000 b, 45.
[51] Scriptores Historia Augustae *Aurelian* 4.2, 5.5; Sextus Pompeius Festus *De verborum significatu quae supersunt* 18; Turcan 2000 b, 45; White 2005, 132.
[52] Halsberghe 1972, 132-133; Scriptores Historia Augustae *Aurelian* 25.4, 31.7-9; Watson 1999, 188.
[53] Watson 1999, 189.
[54] ORIENS could also refer to the East, in which case the coin could be alluding to Aurelian's victory over Palmyra.
[55] Halsberghe 1972, 164.
[56] Also see Jones 2000, 69.
[57] Van Dam 2008, 178.
[58] Bardill 2012, 98; the historical frieze features soldiers in procession carrying poles topped by small statues of the gods, including Sol.
[59] Bardill 2012, 99.
[60] Bardill 2012, 28 and 88.
[61] Zosimus' *Historia Nova* III.9
[62] Hijmans 2009, 73; Stewart 1993, 42-43.
[63] For example, Catullus 63.39; Tibullus 2.5.60; Propertius *Elegies* 2.15.32; Lucretius *De Rerum Natura* 5.383ff.
[64] For good examples of Sol as a bust see: http://wildwinds.com/coins/ric/postumus/RIC_0317.jpg, or http://wildwinds.com/coins/sear5/s6214.html#RIC_0282,Aureus. For examples of Sol in a quadriga see: http://wildwinds.com/coins/ric/caracalla/RIC_0294ADD.jpg, or http://wildwinds.com/coins/ric/probus/RIC_0776.jpg.
[65] Hijmans 2009, 75.
[66] Molnar 1998, 2; Hijmans 2009, 75.
[67] Watson 1999, 190.
[68] Hijmans 2009, 509; Bardill 2012, 30.

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