



The Puteal Scribonianum

by Peter E. Lewis

The Puteal Scribonianum with colour added.

THE Puteal Scribonianum appears on several coins of the Roman Republic, but what is it? The Latin word, 'puteal', means the enclosure around the opening of a well. The Latin word for a well is 'puleus', and some sort of barrier around it was necessary to stop people falling in. The Latin word, Scribonianum, means 'Scribonian'. The Scribonian family (Gens Scribonia) was an influential Roman family, and in 62 BC Lucius Scribonius Libo repaired the puteal and issued coins to commemorate the event. (**Figure 1**)

The puteal must have been associated with his family in some way. It was situated in the Roman Forum probably near the Temple of Vesta, but it no longer exists and its exact situation is unknown.

What is fascinating about the Puteal Scribonianum is that it did not enclose the opening of a well. It was around a sacred place, a sort of spiritual black-hole. You would not want to be in such a spot, one that had been supernaturally because it had been struck by lightning.

According to Seth Stevenson, the author of an 1889 dictionary of Roman coins, "One of the numerous opinions subsisting, as well among ancient authors as among modern commentators, respecting this place, so often alluded to in Roman history, is this, that on some occasion or other, lightning had fallen upon it, and that in consequence a covered well was constructed there, under authority, by the functionary whose name it bears." In 2019 when the numismatists of the Classical Numismatic



Figure 1 – Denarius of Lucius Scribonius Libo issued in 62 BC with Bonus Eventus on the obverse and the Puteal Scribonianum on the reverse. Crawford 461/1a. (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton XXII, Lot 862. <https://cngcoins.com>)



Figure 3 – Bronze coin of Philip I (244 – 249 AD) minted at Cyrrhus in Cyrrhastica. Diameter 28 mms. On the reverse Zeus holds a thunderbolt. The eagle at his feet is his symbol as a sky god. Butcher 21(a) (Centre for Coins, Culture and Religious History. <https://cccrh.org>)



Figure 2 – Sestertius of Severus Alexander (222 – 235 AD) minted at Rome showing Jupiter about to throw a thunderbolt. RIC 634. (Status International Auction 361, Lot 8508)

Group were describing the reverse of the coin in Figure 1 they said, "Though a puteal is often described as a 'well-head', the Puteal Scribonianum depicted here was a walled enclosure erected around the spot of a lightning strike in the Roman Forum. The Romans believed such spots were marked by the gods, and hence worthy of veneration. Erected around 204 BC by a member of the Libo clan, the Puteal became a popular meeting spot for money lenders and merchants." If you were near such a sacred site you could expect that money lenders and merchants would deal with you honestly.

The gods most likely to throw thunderbolts to the ground are Jupiter, Minerva and Apollo. Jupiter was known to the Greeks as Zeus, and on a sestertius of Severus Alexander (221 -235 AD) he is about to throw a thunderbolt. (Figure 2) On a coin of Philip I (244 – 249 AD) he holds a thunderbolt while seated in a temple. On the reverse the Greek legend, ΔΙΟΚ ΚΑΤΕΒΑΤΟΝ, means 'of Zeus coming down', and presumably it refers to lightning coming down from the sky. (Figure 3) Perhaps the people thought that the god's divine essence was in the lightning. On some ancient coins the

thunderbolt is shown on its own or on an altar as on a tetradrachm minted at Seleucia Pieria in 6 AD. (Figure 4) In Zoroastrianism, which was the religion of ancient Persia, fire was divine; and Sasanian coins show the Zoroastrian god, Ahura Mazda, in the flames. (Figure 5)

Minerva was known to the Greeks as Athena, and on a tetradrachm of Antigonos Gonatas (277 – 239 BC) she is about to throw a thunderbolt. (Figure 6) As the god of light, Apollo was also associated with lightning, and a thunderbolt appears below his laureate head on a denarius minted at Rome in 85 BC. (Figure 7) But none of these gods actually made the thunderbolts: they just threw them. They were made by Vulcan, the god of fire. He was the divine blacksmith and he also made weapons for the gods. In a painting by François Perrier we see men working in Vulcan's workshop. (Figure 8)

It is generally assumed that the Puteal Scribonianum had four sides, but in Michael Crawford's book, *Roman Republican Coinage*, he lists coins of Lucius Scribonius Libo showing only three of the sides. On one side there is a hammer as shown in Figure 1. On another side there is a pair of tongs (Figure 9) and on another, an anvil. (Figure 10) They are the tools that Vulcan used to make the thunderbolt, but on a denarius minted at Rome in 46 BC there are four objects



Figure 4 – Tetradrachm of Augustus minted at Seleucia Pieria in 6 AD showing a thunderbolt on a cushion on an altar. GIC 112. (Gemini, LLC, Auction IX, Lot 256)



Figure 5 – Silver drachm of Hormizd II (303 – 309 AD). Diameter 26 mms. On the reverse attendants stand beside a fire altar. (Vauctions. Auction 253, Lot 69)



Figure 6 – Tetradrachm of Antigonos Gonatas (277 – 239 BC) minted at Amphipolis with Pan on a Macedonian shield on the obverse and Athena about to throw a thunderbolt on the reverse. (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton XVIII, Lot 483)



Figure 7 – Denarius of Mn Fonteius C. F. issued in 85 BC with a thunderbolt below the laureate head of Apollo on the obverse and a thyrsus below Cupid riding a goat on the reverse. Crawford 353/1a. (Roma Numismatics Ltd, Electronic Auction 59, Lot 734)



Figure 8 – “The Forge of Vulcan” by François Perrier about 1640 in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. (Wikimedia Commons)

on the reverse: a hammer, tongs, an anvil and an object in the centre that looks like a cap. (Figure 11) Crawford described this object as a garlanded punch die (used in minting coins, in keeping with Moneta on the obverse) but it is unlikely that a punch die would be garlanded and the object is probably the cap (the pileus or cap of liberty) that Vulcan wore. (Figure 12) Whatever it is, it has led to the suggestion that this object was on the fourth side of the Puteal Scribonianum. In 2011 Ursula Kampmann proposed that there were four symbols on the Puteal Scribonianum, the fourth being



Figure 11 – Denarius of T. Carisius issued in 46 BC with the head of Juno Moneta on the obverse and 4 objects relating to Vulcan on the reverse. Crawford 464/2. (Classical Numismatic Group. Electronic Auction 436, Lot 481)



Figure 9 – Denarius of Lucius Scribonius Libo issued in 62 BC with a pair of tongs below the garland on the reverse. Crawford 461/1b. (Numismatik Lanz München, Auction 151, Lot 639)



Figure 10 – Denarius of Lucius Scribonius Libo issued in 62 BC with an anvil below the garland on the reverse. Crawford 461/1c. (Ira & Larry Goldberg Coins & Collectables, Inc., Auction 80, Lot 3046)



Figure 12 – Marble bust of Vulcan wearing his cap in the Vatican Museum in Rome. (Photocopy of the image in Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology)

the cap of liberty. (Im Schatten der Adler Roms, *Münzen der Republik aus der Sammlung Wyprächtiger*, Zurich 2011) On some of the coins that have the Puteal Scribonianum on the reverse the object below the garland does look like a cap. (**Figure 13**)

The Puteal Scribonianum also appears on coins issued jointly by Lucius Scribonius Libo and L. Aemilius Lepidus Paullus in 62 BC. The latter claimed to be descended from L. Aemilius Paullus who defeated King Perseus of Macedon at the Battle of Pydna in 168 BC. When Saint Paul went to Cyprus on his first missionary journey in 47 AD the governor was Sergius Paullus, probably a

member of the same family. The Latin form of Paul's name is Paullus, but it might have been just a coincidence that the governor had the same name. On the jointly issued coins the veiled head of Concordia is on the obverse. Crawford thought that it referred to the *Concordia ordinum* which aimed to unite the various classes in Roman society and was central to Cicero's policy in 63 BC. Cicero was a Roman orator who was supported by L. Aemilius Lepidus Paullus. On the jointly issued coins there are only two reverses, one with a hammer and another with tongs. (**Figures 14 and 15**)

On the coins issued only by Lucius Scribonius Libo, there is the head of

Bonus Eventus on the obverse. In Latin the words mean 'good outcome' and he was its personification. The good outcome might simply have been the restoration of the puteal, or the good deal that people expected from the moneylenders and merchants who congregated there. According to Crawford, "Given the date of this issue, it is perhaps not unreasonable to see in the obverse type a reflection of the successful prosecution of the war against Catiline." Catiline was a Roman who championed the poor in Roman society. When he failed to win the consulship he organized a rebellion, but it was defeated and he was killed in January 62 BC.

What is the significance of the musical instruments that feature so prominently on the puteal? Do they refer to the Scribonia family or do they indicate which god threw the thunderbolt into the Roman Forum? Although usually described as lyres they are more correctly called citharas. John Melville Jones in *A Dictionary of Ancient Roman Coins* explains that although 'lyre' is the most useful general word to use for these instruments, the lyre is (strictly speaking) an instrument which has a rounded sound box and was originally, according to tradition, the shell of a tortoise which the god Mercury used for this purpose. The cithara has a wooden sound box usually flat at the bottom. Jones goes on to say that the lyre is the symbol of Mercury and the cithara of Apollo. Coins and statues show Apollo



Figure 13 – Denarius of Lucius Scribonius Libo issued in 62 BC with a cap below the garland on the obverse. Although described by CNG as an anvil, it looks more like a cap. (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 81, Lot 923)



Figure 14 – Denarius of L. Aemilius Lepidus Paullus and L. Scribonius Libo with Concordia on the obverse and a hammer below the Puteal Scribonianum on the reverse. Crawford 417/1a. (Tauler & Fau Subastas, Auction 60, Lot 73)



Figure 15 – Denarius of L. Aemilius Lepidus Paullus and L. Scribonius Libo with Concordia on the obverse and tongs below the Puteal Scribonianum on the reverse. Crawford 417/1b. (Roma Numismatics Ltd, Electronic Sale 41, Lot 617)



Figure 16 – Gold coin (aureus) of Augustus minted at Lugdunum in 11 BC showing Apollo holding a cithara. Sear 1579. (Hess Divo AG, Auction 308, Lot 138)

playing a cithara. (Figures 16 and 17)

Crawford said that the musical instruments on the puteal, like the garland, may be purely decorative. But citharas would be an unusual sort of decoration and they probably have a symbolic meaning in this situation. Apollo would be the obvious reference. He usually wears a laurel wreath, and the garland on the puteal might also refer to him. On the coins the citharas extend beyond the edge of the structure and apparently the edge could be seen through the citharas. If the puteal was in the shape of a square, the construction of the citharas would have been quite complicated as shown in Figure 18. Perhaps the builder thought that having the citharas extending out from the sides was a more attractive design.

The significant symbol on the puteal was a pair of citharas (lyres). Pairs of lyres appear on coins issued by the Roman emperors Nerva and Trajan in Lycia in Anatolia. (Figures 19 and 20) Above the lyres there is an owl, the symbol of Athena. So, was it Athena who threw the thunderbolt? Athena was



Figure 17 – Marble statue made in Rome in the 2nd century AD. It shows Apollo holding a cithara. (Wikimedia Commons. Vatican Museums. Photo by Jastrow.)

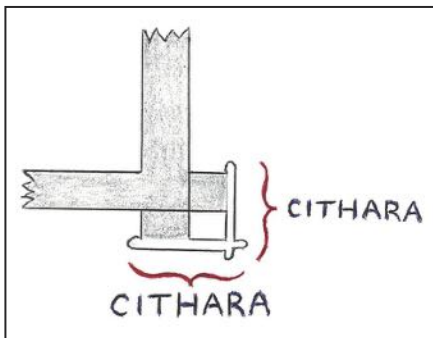


Figure 18 – Drawing of a corner of the Puteal Scribonianum as it might have been.

the patron god of craftsmen and it was she who made the double flute called an aulos. Perhaps in Greek mythology there was a story about two lyres that Athena had made.

In his dictionary Seth Stevenson seems to be tired of discussing the Puteal Scribonianum. He wrote, “*But the whole matter remains involved in obscurity, and is too much associated with fabulous history, and too little with events of any importance, to repay or to deserve the learned researches and conjectures which have been bestowed on it.*” However, the coin is important because it gives us an insight into the way ancient people thought about natural phenomena. Whenever I look at my own example

of the coin (Figure 21) I try to imagine a god hurling a thunderbolt into the Roman Forum and a Scribonian reverently building a puteal around that sacred spot, and I realize how different we are in our thinking today.

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Figure 19 – Drachm of Nerva minted in Lycia in 97 AD showing an owl above two lyres. SNG von Aulock 4266. (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 63, Lot 1018)



Figure 20 – Drachm of Trajan minted in Lycia in 98 AD showing an owl above two lyres. SNG von Aulock 4267. (Roma Numismatics Ltd, Auction 8, Lot 771)



Figure 21 – The author’s denarius.