MAGNUS MAXIMUS by PETER E. LEWIS

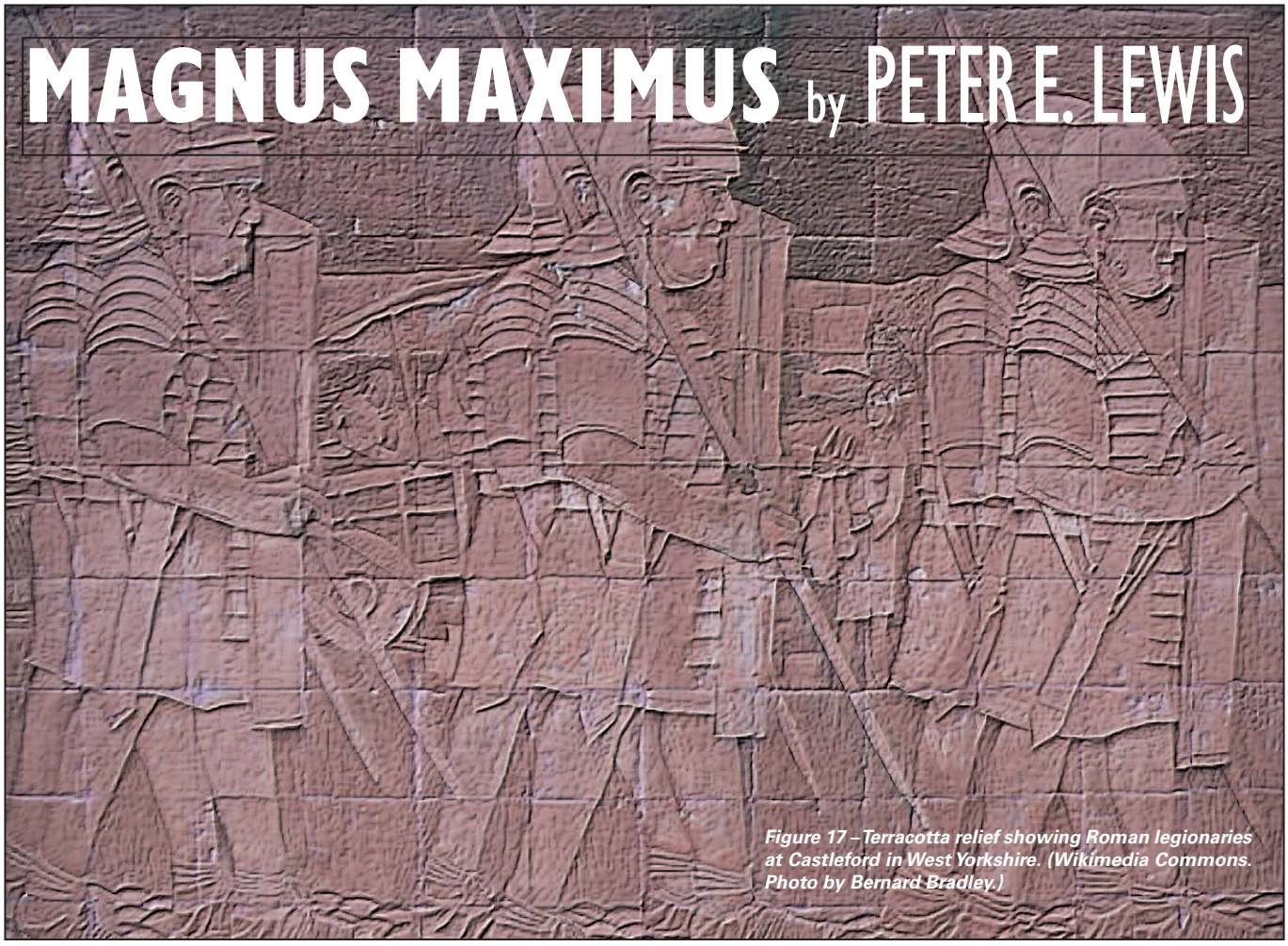

Figure 17 – Terracotta relief showing Roman legionaries at Castleford in West Yorkshire. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Bernard Bradley.)

YOU have heard of Alexander the Great, Herod the Great, and other greats, but the greatest great (in his own estimation) was Magnus Maximus. His name is Latin for "greatest great". History, however, has judged him differently and a more appropriate name would be "loser". In any case, his story is a fascinating one and significant not only politically but theologically. His coins are certainly worth the attention of collectors.

Maximus was born in Spain in about 335 AD and he was probably a distant relative of Theodosius I, who was a Roman emperor from 379 to 395. (**Figure 1**) Theodosius was born at Cauca in north-west Spain and he was a successful general in the Roman army when he was appointed to be the emperor of the eastern part of the empire by Gratian, who was the emperor of the western half. Gratian's uncle, Valens, who had been the emperor in the east, was killed in a battle against the Goths in 379 and a strong man like Theodosius was needed to protect that part of the empire. Maximus was also a general in the Roman army. He had command of the troops in Britain and was successful in defending the country against the Picts and the Scots.

Figure 1 – Bronze coin of Theodosius I minted at Antioch between 393 and 395 AD. Diameter 22 mms. Obverse: bust of Theodosius. Reverse: Theodosius stands holding a standard and a globe. The legend means "Glory of the Romans." (Author's collection)

Gratian (**Figure 2**) was only 15 when his father Valentinian I died suddenly in 375 and he became the ruler of the western empire. The soldiers in Britain were dissatisfied with Gratian because he had granted privileges to barbarian units in the army and in 383 they declared Maximus to be the emperor. Maximus re-opened the mint at Londinium (London) which had been closed for over fifty years and issued gold coins naming himself emperor. (**Figure 3**) On these coins the letters in the exergue are AVG for "Augusta", which was the name of London at the time. According to David Sear in Volume Five of *Roman Coins and their Values* published in 2014, "There has been some controversy over the identification of the ephemeral mint signing itself 'AVG'. Scholarly opinion now seems to favour an attribution to London (Londinium) which since the time of Julian had born the name 'Augusta'."

Maximus crossed over into Gaul with most of his army while Gratian marched his troops west to confront Maximus. As Gratian moved towards Lutetia (Paris) expecting to engage Maximus in battle his soldiers began to desert and transfer their allegiance to Maximus. Eventually finding himself alone Gratian fled south but was pur-

Figure 2 – Bronze coin of Gratian minted at Siscia between 372 and 375 AD. Diameter 17 mms. Obverse: bust of Gratian. Reverse: Gratian drags captive by the hair and holds a standard with the Chi-Rho monogram of Christ on it. The legend means "Glory of the Romans." (Author's collection)

Figure 3 – Solidus of Magnus Maximus minted at London in 383 AD. Obverse: bust of Maximus. Reverse: Maximus holds a standard and Victory on a globe. The legend means "Restorer of the Republic." (Photocopy with colour added of coin 20630 in Volume 5 of Roman Coins and their Values by David Sear. Permission kindly granted by Spink & Son Ltd.)

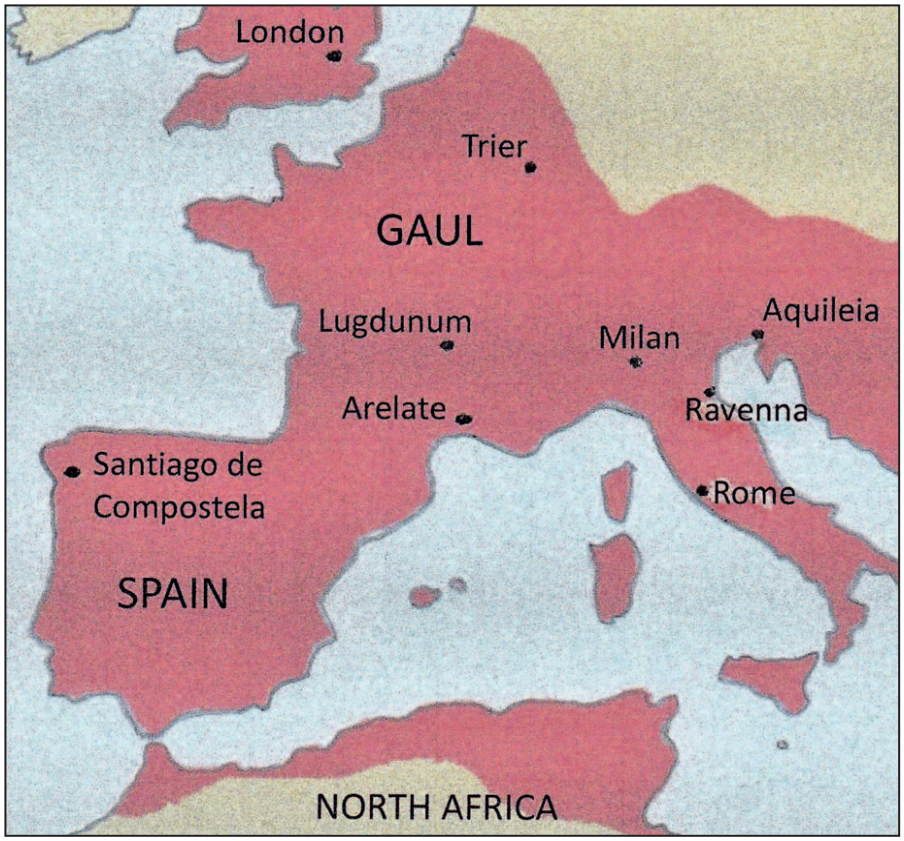

Figure 4 – Map of the western half of the Roman Empire. Santiago de Compostela did not exist at the time.

sued by one of Maximus' officers who captured and killed him at Lugdunum (Lyon). He was only 24. Maximus made his headquarters at Trier (See map, **Figure 4**) and claimed all of Gaul, Spain and Britain as his territory. In Italy the death of Gratian meant that he was succeeded as emperor by his brother, Valentinian II, who was only 12 years old. (**Figure 5**) During this time Theodosius had been occupied in the east defending the empire against the Sasanians who ruled Persia, and he reluctantly recognized Maximus as an emperor in order to save Valentinian II who could still be the emperor of Italy, Pannonia (Slovenia) and North Africa.

An uneasy peace reigned for about three years during which Maximus minted gold coins at Trier, London, and Arelate (Arles), which showed two emperors (Maximus and Theodosius) on the reverse. (**Figure 6**) At Trier he minted a gold coin with only himself on the reverse. (**Figures 7 and 8**) He also issued coins in silver (**Figure 9**) and bronze (**Figure 10**). He was establishing his empire and ingratiating himself with Theodosius. It is important to understand that this century was very significant for the history of Christianity. In 325 Constantine the Great had convened the Council of Nicaea to decide questions about the nature of Jesus Christ, but theological dissension persisted amongst the Christians in the empire. Theodosius was a devout Christian with rigid views on theological matters, and to squash dissent he convened the Council of Constantinople in 381. The Council promulgated the doctrine of the Trinity, that there was "one Divinity of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost." Dissenting views were condemned and those who held them were declared to be heretics. Theodosius went on to forbid pagan worship throughout the empire.

Living in Spain at this time was a wealthy, cultured gentleman called Priscillian who held theological views different from the mainstream. In other words he was a heretic. Apparently he taught that the Son differed from the Father in name only, and even today scholars still dispute whether he really was a heretic. At the time some Spanish bishops followed Priscillian while others opposed him. A synod (meeting of clergy) at Bordeaux in Gaul put him on trial, but to avoid condemnation he appealed directly to the emperor, Magnus Maximus, in Trier. Maximus was a fanatical Christian, and wanting to take a tough stance in line with Theodosius, he ordered that Priscillian and his followers be executed. This was the first time in history that a Christian was put to death for being a heretic. It set a precedent that led to the death of countless people in later times.

Figure 5 – Bronze coin of Valentinian II minted at Siscia from 384 to 387 AD. Diameter 13 mms. Obverse: bust of Valentinian II. Reverse: Victory advances with wreath. The Legend VICTORIA AVGGG means "Victory of the three Augusti." Presumably they are Valentinian, Theodosius and Arcadius (the son and co-emperor of Theodosius). (Author's collection)

Figure 6 – Solidus of Magnus Maximus minted at London from 383 to 384 AD. Obverse: bust of Maximus. Reverse: two emperors hold a globe while Victory hovers in the background. The legend means "Victory of the two Augusti". (Heritage Auction 3030, Lot 23982)

In a small way Priscillian still influences us today. If you have a Bible go to the First Letter of John and read verses 7 and 8 in chapter 5. (**Figure 11**) If your Bible is the King James Version the words that I have printed in red will be just part of the text. If your Bible is a modern one, e.g. NIV or NRSV, the words in red will not be in the text but there will be a note at the bottom of the page

Figure 7 – Solidus of Magnus Maximus minted at Trier from 383 to 384 AD. Obverse: bust of Maximus. Reverse: Maximus stands holding Victory on a globe and a standard with the Chi-Rho monogram of Christ on it. The legend means "Restorer of the Republic." (Obolos by Nomos, Webauction 5, Lot 888)

Figure 8 – Portrait of Magnus Maximus on the coin in Figure 7 with colour added.

explaining that the words appear only in some old Latin manuscripts of the Bible. What must have happened is that Priscillian or one of his followers wrote the words in the margin of the Bible they were using and they were later incorporated into the text. We know this because the earliest instance of the words being quoted as part of John's letter is in a book, *Liber Apologeticus*, which was originally written by Priscillian or one of his followers.

Priscillian's body was taken to his home country which was in the north-west corner of Spain where he was held in high regard. According to Sulpicius Severus who wrote his *Chronica* (Histories) in about 400 AD, his funeral was "celebrated with great pomp." What is interesting in all this is that some scholars believe that the remains entombed in the great cathedral of Santiago de Compostela (**Figure 12**) are not those of Saint James but of Priscillian. The name "Santiago" is Spanish for "Saint James". It seems that after his funeral in 385 Priscillian was forgotten by the people

Continued overleaf

Figure 9 – Siliqua of Magnus Maximus minted at Trier from 384 to 388 AD. Diameter 14 mms. The coin has been clipped as often occurred with Maximus' silver coins. Obverse: bust of Maximus. Reverse: Roma enthroned. The legend means "Courage of the Romans". (Author's collection)

Figure 10 – Bronze coin of Magnus Maximus minted at Arelate (Arles) from 383 to 386 AD. Diameter 22 mms. Obverse: bust of Maximus. Reverse: Maximus holds Victory on a globe and raises a kneeling figure. The legend means "Restoration of the Republic." (Author's collection)

There are three that testify: **there are three that testify in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one. And there are three that testify on earth**: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree.

Figure 11 – Verses 7 and 8 in Chapter 5 of the First Letter of John. The words in red are not present in modern versions.

MAKE YOUR FIRST CALL TO THESE SUPPORTING ADVERTISERS

(AND PLEASE TELL THEM... YOU "SAW IT IN CAB")

ANDA 6
auction.gadoury.com 11
Brisbane Stamp & Coin Show . . .25
Canberra Numisco 3
Chris Rudd 44
Classy Collectables 44
Coin Trends 67
Coins Australia . . . . . .
Coinwo . . . . . .
Downies 76
Drake Sterling Numismatics .41, 44
Edlins of Canberra & Yass 17
IAG 4, 49
IBNS Convention Perth 34
japaneseinvasionmoney.com .55
Klaus Ford 38-39
M.E.F. Books 51
Mowbray Collectables 29
Noble Numismatics 2
Romanorum 57
Royal Australian Mint 9
Roxburys Auction House 83
SCDAA Petersham Fair 41
Sterling and Currency 29, 43
Mick Vort-Ronald 37
vpcoins 29
Trevor Wilkin 74
Ye Olde Coin Company 35

TO BE UPDATED

Figure 12 – Façade of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Antoine Cardotte)

Figure 13 – Five-cents Euro coin issued by Spain in 2016 showing the façade of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. (Author's collection)

and there were just vague memories of some important Christian person buried there. A fanciful legend developed that after the apostle James was martyred in Jerusalem in 44 AD his body was taken to north-west Spain where it was discovered in 813 and revealed to be that of the saint. Today thousands of Christians including many Australians make the pilgrimage across northern Spain to Santiago de Compostela and they find the experience inspirational. It does not matter whether the tomb is that of James, Priscillian or Donald Duck. It is the journey that matters not the destination. There are many religious tokens and medals that relate to this pilgrimage, and in 2016 a 5-cents coin was issued by the Spanish government showing the façade of the cathedral. (**Figure 13**)

By 387 the ambition and greed of Maximus had become so intense that he declared his young son, Flavius Victor, to be co-emperor (**Figure 14**), and invaded Italy. Valentinian II and his relatives fled from Milan to Thessalonica in Greece and sought the protection of Theodosius. Theodosius probably would have allowed his Spanish kinsman to take over Italy if it were not for an unexpected happening. He fell in love with Valentinian's sister, the lovely Galla. Theodosius' wife, Aelia Flaccilla had died in 386 and the lonely emperor was smitten by the beautiful young woman. They married in 388 on condition that Theodosius would invade Italy and remove Maximus from power. The child of their union was Galla Placidia who had an adventurous and influential life in the next century. It is amazing how love can change the course of history.

Maximus consolidated his hold on northern Italy minting coins at Milan and Aquileia (**Figure 15**). It is interesting to note that except for the occasional appearance of the Chi-Rho monogram of Christ there are no Christian symbols or words on any of the coins of Maximus, Theodosius or Valentinian. The coins were all intended to promote the image of the emperor, and one wonders just how genuine was their Christian faith.

In 388 Theodosius and his army advanced into Italy and Maximus was soon captured in his headquarters at Aquileia and beheaded. Flavius Victor, who had been left behind in Gaul, was also captured and strangled. Valentinian returned to Italy as the sole ruler of the western half of the Roman Empire. But just as

Figure 14 – Siliqua of Flavius Victor minted at Milan from 387 to 388 AD. Diameter 16 mms. Obverse: bust of Flavius Victor. Reverse: Roma enthroned. The legend means "Courage of the Romans." This coin was part of the Filey Hoard found in North Yorkshire in 2009. (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton XX, Lot 900)

the memory of Priscillian persisted in a distorted way, so did that of Maximus. He must have made an impression on the people of Wales when he was fighting in Britain because stories about him became incorporated into Welsh legends. Over time, accounts of his deeds became embellished and eventually there was a mythology about Macsen Wledig, which is Welsh for "Emperor Maximus". He was said to be the ancestor of Welsh kings and even the father of a saint. There is an old church in Caernafon in north Wales dedicated to this holy person, Saint Peblig, who founded a monastery there. The present church, Eglwys Llanbeblig (**Figure 16**) dates from the 13th century but there has been a church on the site since the 5th century. The site was next to a Roman fort that had existed from 77 to 394 AD. Today the area is urbanized, and the churchyard and cemetery have been vandalized and are frequented by drunks and drug addicts. This should remind us that although Maximus was a capable general he had a dark side represented by the tragic fate of Priscillian and his followers.

☆ ☆ ☆

Subscribe to *CAB* now. It's cheaper and you get it before it appears in the newsagencies. See the subscription form on page XX of this issue.

Figure 15 – Bronze coin of Magnus Maximus minted at Aquileia from 387 to 388 AD. Diameter 13 mms. Obverse: bust of Magnus Maximus. Reverse: camp-gate with star between the turrets. The legend means "Hope of the Romans." (Author's collection)

Figure 16 – Eglwys Llanbeblig at Caernafon in North Wales (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Alan Fryer)

BEXLEY STAMP & COIN ACCESSORIES

KEN PULLEN has taken over the accessories side of Bexley Stamps from Mike Hill. Ken had been a customer of Mike's for many years. In a whirlwind 10-day period the decision to purchase and start operating the Accessories component of Bexley Stamps was taken and implemented.

As could be imagined there was a lot of stock to move, a lot of detail to gather and work with, all very quickly.

A few weeks into the job, Ken is appreciative of the encouragement he has received and is fulfilling orders while increasing his knowledge about many specialised products he had not encountered previously.

Ken's range of products and current offers for collectors can be seen on his website *bexleystamps.com.au*. His email address is: *sales@bexleystamps.com.au* You can phone him on 02 4573 1332 or write to the new postal address: PO Box 36 KURMOND NSW 2757.

☆ ☆ ☆