

The Love Coins of Ancient Rome

by Peter E. Lewis



IN the collection of the Centre for Coins, Culture and Religious History there is an unusual coin that was minted at Rome in 320 AD. (Figure 1) On the obverse there is the head of Licinius I who was the ruler of the eastern half of the Roman Empire, and on the reverse there is a puzzling set of letters in the exergue. (Figure 2) The first letter on the left is R, which stands for Rome, and the last letter on the right is S, which stands for secunda meaning the second (factory). Between these letters there are four Greek letters, ερωσ (eros), and three of the letters are in the form of a monogram. The letters have been separated in Figure 3. Eros

means “love”, but why is this word in the exergue? To answer the question one needs to know something about the history of the Roman Empire at the time.

When Diocletian became the emperor in 284 he realized that the empire was too large to be ruled by one man and he established a system (called a tetrarchy) by which the empire was ruled by four men. He appointed Maximian to be the Augustus (chief ruler) in the western half of the empire while he was the Augustus in the eastern half, and he appointed Galerius to be his deputy (Caesar) in the east and Constantius to be the Caesar in the west. Constantius’

son, Constantine, was very ambitious, and when Constantius died in Britain in 306 he declared himself to be the Augustus in the west.

Diocletian and Maximian abdicated in 305 and Galerius succeeded Diocletian as Augustus in the east. When Constantius died in 306 Galerius appointed Severus to be the Augustus in the west and Constantine reluctantly accepted the title of Caesar. Also in 306 Maxentius, the ruler of Italy, claimed the title of Caesar, and when Severus invaded Italy Maxentius defeated him and executed him. Galerius then appointed his comrade Licinius to be the Augustus in the west.



A billon centenionalis with Licinius I on the obverse. On the reverse VOT XX means vows or promises made by Licinius for the next 20 years, and the legend means ‘to our lord Licinius Augustus. Sear 15338.

When Galerius died in 311 Licinius and Constantine agreed to have a peaceful relationship. In 312 Constantine invaded Italy and defeated Maxentius in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge just north of Rome. Constantine later claimed that a cross had appeared in the sky before the battle and Christ had given him the victory. Constantine then ruled Italy and the western half of the empire, and in 313 he met with Licinius at Milan to formalize their alliance and issue the Edict of Milan which established tolerance for all

religions. Previously Galerius and Diocletian had persecuted the Christians. Also in Milan Licinius married Constantine's half-sister, Constantia, and in 315 their son Licinius Junior, was born.

Now we are in a position to understand the significance of the word "eros" on the coin, and there are several possible explanations which we will consider in turn. Firstly, did it refer to the marital union of Licinius and Constantia, whose son was five years old in 320 and appears on the obverse of some of these eros coins? (Figure 4) Eros was

the Greek word for "love" in the sense of sexual desire, and the Greek god Eros was the son of Aphrodite, the goddess of female beauty and sexual allure, and Ares, the god of war. To the Romans Aphrodite was known as Venus, and Ares as Mars. Eros was usually portrayed as a child with wings and a bow



Figure 2 – Detail of Figure 1.



Figure 3 – Diagram showing the individual letters in the exergue.



Figure 4 – A billon centenionalis of Licinius II as Caesar minted at Rome in 320. The legend on the reverse means 'of our Caesars'. Sear 15438. (Roma Numismatics Ltd, E-Sale 54, Lot 897)



Figure 5 – Bronze coin of Maximinus I (235 – 238) minted at Deultum in Thrace. 19 mms. On the reverse Eros rides a dolphin. He was a fun-loving boy. Varbanov 2434. (Centre for Coins, Culture and Religious History)



Figure 6 – Bronze coin of Septimius Severus (193 – 211) minted at Nicopolis ad Istrum. 16 mms. On the reverse Eros holds a torch, which refers to the Greek myth of Eros and Psyche, in which Eros himself falls in love. (Centre for Coins, Culture and Religious History)

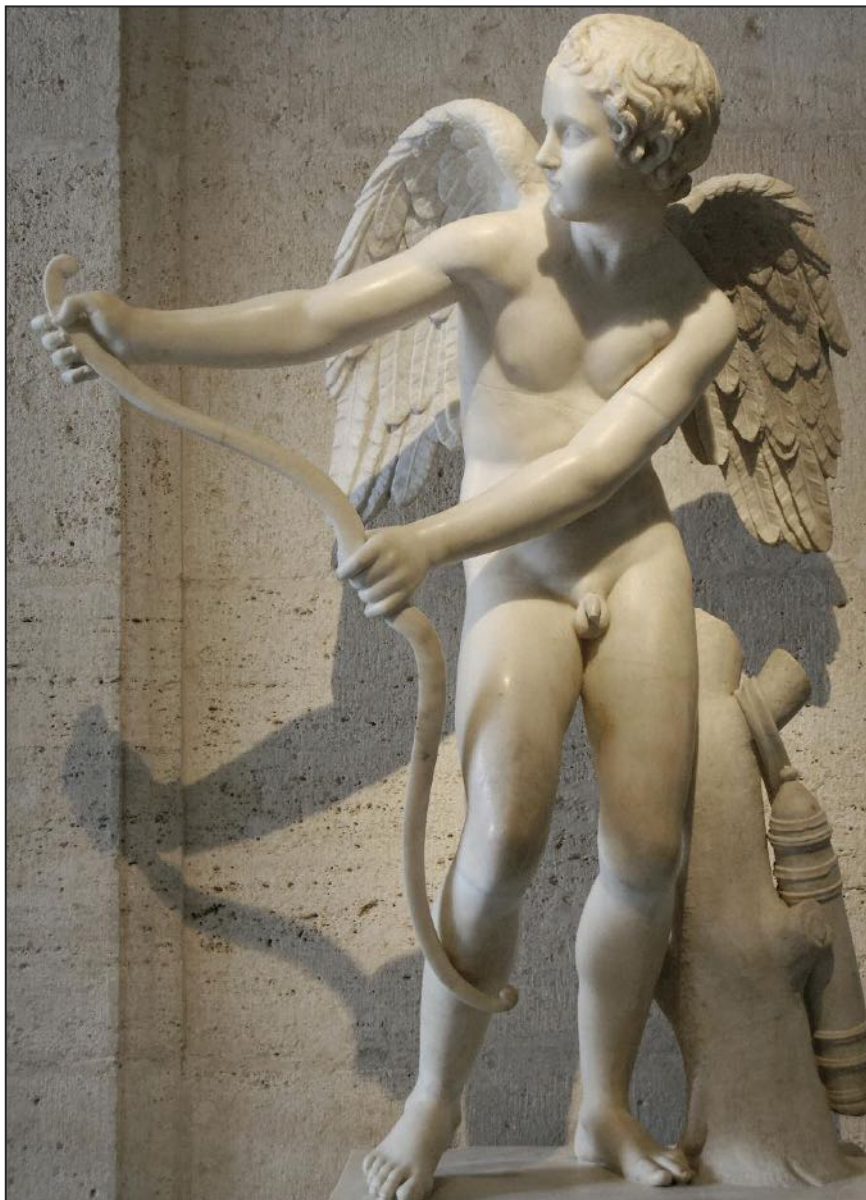


Figure 7 - Marble statue of Eros stringing his bow in the Capitoline Museums in Rome. It is a Roman copy of a statue by Lysippus of Sicyon in Greece, c. 340 BC. (Wikimedia Commons)

and arrow. (Figure 5 and 6) He was a mischievous boy who delighted in shooting people with his invisible arrows and once pierced they would fall in love with whoever they were with at the time, usually with hilarious results. In a famous statue we see him getting ready. (Figure 7) No one was safe from his arrows, not even his mother and the other gods. In a painting by Pompeo Batoni, the goddess Artemis has taken Eros's bow away from him. To the Romans Artemis and Eros were known as Diana and Cupid. (Figure 8)

It is unlikely that the eros coins refer to Licinius and Constantia. The word "eros" is not generally used for the bond between husband and wife, and not only Licinius I and II appear on these coins but Constantine and his sons Crispus and Constantine II. (Figures 9, 10 and 11) Another possible explanation is that the word "love" refers to Constantine's Christian faith. It occurs often in the Christian scriptures both as a verb and a noun. In John's gospel the author wrote that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son (John 3:16), and in the First Letter of John the author wrote that God is love (1 John 4:8). In Christian theology the idea of love is central, but in the New Testament, which was originally written in Greek, the Greek word used for love is *αγαπη* (agape) which essentially means a self-giving concern for others. The word *ερωσ* (eros) does not occur in the New Testament.

It is important to understand that in the ancient Greek language there were four words for "love". The language is more precise than English in this regard. In English "love" is a much-abused word, e.g. "I love meat pies." In Greek



Figure 8 – ‘Diana and Cupid’ by Pompeo Batoni, 1761, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Wikimedia Commons)

there are four words for “love”: *eros* for sexual desire, *philia* for non-sexual attraction such as between friends or a liking for something, *storge* for natural affection as between a mother and child, and *agape* (pronounced a-gar-pay). Therefore it is unlikely that the word *eros* on the coins referred to Constantine’s Christian faith.

Although Constantine claimed to be

converted when he defeated Maxentius, the sun-god Sol continued to appear on his coins until about 320 AD, and he was not baptized until he was dying in 337. He was aware that Christianity was becoming popular in the empire and he decided to get on the bandwagon. He was not the devout Christian as often portrayed in later Christian literature. David Vagi in his book, *Coinage*

and *History of the Roman Empire*, wrote, “On the one hand he was a self-assured emissary of God, and on the other he was an utterly ruthless murderer and a single-minded aggressor who would go to any length to become sole emperor.” Vagi’s assessment sounds harsh but it is probably true.

So, what is the explanation for *eros* being on these coins? In the nineteenth



Figure 9 – Billon centenionalis of Constantine I minted at Rome in 320. RIC VII, 225. (Roma Numismatics Ltd, E-Sale 47, Lot 819)



Figure 10 – Billon centenionalis of Crispus as Caesar minted at Rome in 320. RIC VII, 229.
(Gorny & Mosch Giessener Münzhandlung Auction 204, Lot 2582)

century it was realized that the Latin word for love was AMOR and that it was a type of palindrome, i.e. it meant something whether read forwards or backwards. When read backwards it is ROMA, the city minting these coins. This explanation is supported by the fact that the *eros* exergue occurs not only on coins with the VOT reverses but on coins with the goddess Roma on

the reverse, and the legend surrounding the goddess is ROMAE AETERNAE (to eternal Rome). (Figure 12)

Victor Clark is a coin dealer (Victor's Imperial Coins) who has a master's degree in history, and in an article entitled 'Romae Aeternae – A Curious Cryptogram', which is on his website www.constantinethegreatcoins.com, he discusses the matter. He says that the

Romans were fond of palindromes and there is a famous example in Virgil's Aeneid (4:37), where Aeneas said to Dido that the oracle commanded him to go to the land of his "amor", which is Roma. Victor goes on to say that the palindrome refers to the great temple of Venus and Roma in Rome. (Figure 13)

The temple of Venus and Roma was built by the emperor Hadrian in 135 and

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Figure 11 – Billon centenionalis of Constantine II as Caesar minted at Rome in 320. RIC VII, 231. (Numismatik Naumann Auction 76, Lot 557)

was the largest in Rome. (Figure 14) It was damaged by fire in 307 but restored by Maxentius (306 – 312) and featured on his coins. (Figure 15) Today it is a ruined, but still impressive site, south-east of the Colosseum. What was unusual about this temple was that the two goddesses were back to back. They were like the palindrome, AMOR (Venus) and ROMA (Rome). This situation is clearly shown on a plan of the temple, which was really two temples facing in opposite directions. The black

rectangles represent the platforms on which the statues of the seated goddesses stood. (Figure 16) Hadrian spoke Latin and must have known the palindrome because he designed the temple in that way.

But there is more to this story about the *eros* coins. In his article Victor referred to a book by the great numismatist Andrew Alföldi entitled *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome* (translated by Harold Mattingly in 1998) in which he suggested that *eros*



Figure 12 – Billon centenionalis of Constantine I minted at Rome in 320. On the reverse Roma holds a shield with X/V on it, and the legend is ROMAE AETERNAE (to eternal Rome). RIC VII 195. (Image courtesy of Victor's Imperial Coins)



Figure 13 – The Temple of Venus and Roma in 2015. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Mainly Twelve)

in the exergue might have been an attempt by the pagan aristocracy of Rome to use the old religion of mystery and romance to confront the pro-Christian policies of Constantine. Although Constantine had justified his invasion of Italy in 312 by accusing Maxentius of being a cruel tyrant, Maxentius had generated favour with the Romans by restoring their temple of Venus and Roma and by other measures, and many Romans would have been disappointed by the result of the battle of the Milvian Bridge. In a personal communication Victor said that numismatists



Figure 14 – Sestertius of Hadrian (117 – 138) with the Temple of Venus and Roma on the reverse. Sear 3649. The single columns on either side probably represent the rows of columns that enclosed the whole site. (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 67, Lot 1473)



Figure 15 – Follis of Maxentius (306 – 312) with Roma seated in her temple on the reverse. The reverse legend means ‘preserver of her city’. Sear 14983. (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 206, Lot 412)

had been talking about the subject of the cryptogram for years. He went on to say, “As to whether Alföldi was the first to suggest the Roman aristocracy was being passive aggressive towards Constantine, he may have been; but I suspect others had similar ideas before him.”

Perhaps the pro-Maxentius Romans were too frightened of Constantine to point more plainly to the restored temple that meant so much to them. Julius Caesar had claimed descent from Venus, and there were temples all over the empire to Roma and Augustus, the first Roman emperor. Because Constantine and the Romans spoke Latin, on the coins the reference to the temple of the two goddesses was in Greek, and just to be on the safe side, the letters were partially overlaid on one another. The fear of Constantine must have been great, but despite the danger these coins were minted to remind the people of their favourite goddesses. Even today they have not been forgotten: when we look up at the sky and see the evening star we think of that beautiful goddess and her rascally son, and we still speak of Rome as the eternal city, as on the coin in Figure 12.

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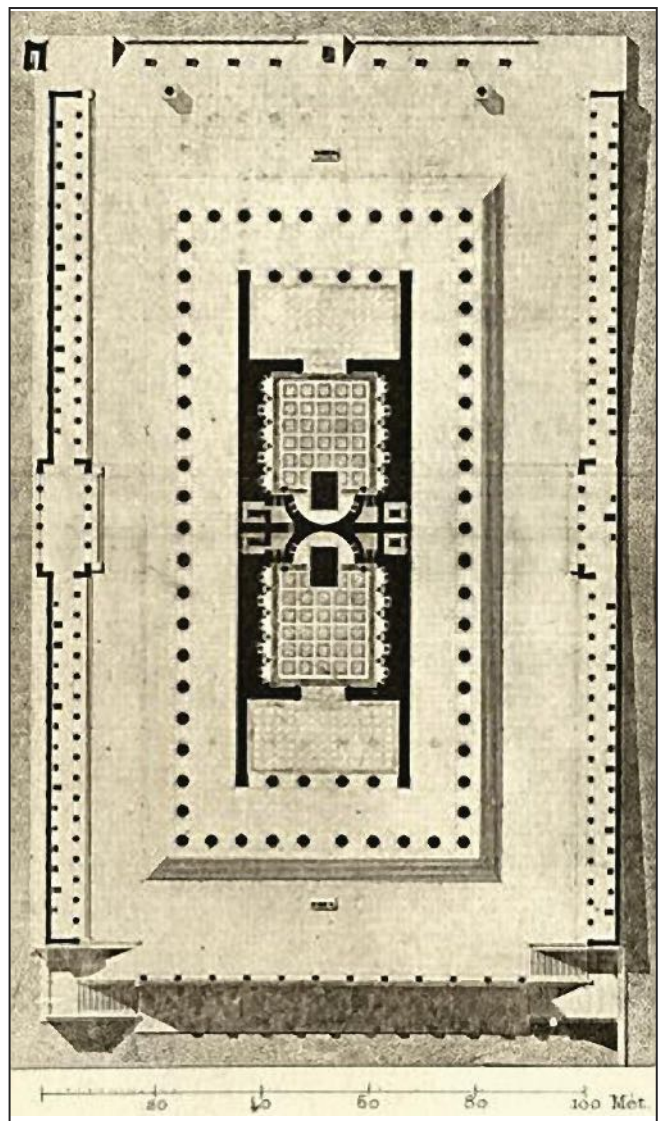


Figure 16 – Plan of the Temple of Venus and Roma. (Wikimedia Commons)

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