Bronze of Constantine I representing the Roman people (Constantinople, 332 CE?)

Obverse bronze of Constantine I representing the Roman people.jpg

Reverse bronze of Constantine I representing the Roman people.jpg

Denomination: semi-nummus (AE4)
Date: 332 CE
Material: bronze
Mint: Constantinople
Actual Location (Collection/Museum): American Numismatic Society; N° 1944.100.23863
Name of Ruler: Constantine I
Obverse (Image and Inscription):
Image: Bust laureate draped left with cornucopia on left shoulder
Inscription: POP(ulus) ROMANVS

Reverse (Image and Inscription):
Image: Wreath, star within
Inscription: -/-//CONSA

Diameter (mm): 14.50mm
Weight (g): 1.46g
Commentary:
RIC VIII, Constantinople, n° 22, p. 448.

This type was first associated with a series of bronze coins dated between 341 and 346 CE. However, Claude Brénot has shown, thanks to the discovery of 31 coins, and among them of 3 exemplars of the type presented here, in the bathhouse of the Arval Brethren located at Magliana outside Rome, that this type could not have been minted so late. Claude Brénot has rightly concluded that the group of coins here discovered must have been part of a lost purse that may have been lost at the latest in 335 CE, fixing thus the terminus ante quem of the minting of the bronze coins bearing the legend POPULUS ROMANUS; the terminus post quem being the date of the opening of the mint of Constantinople, that is 326 CE (see Brénot, “Les monnaies,” p. 299-301). He has thus concluded that one possible occasion for the minting of this bronze type may have been the dedicatio of Constantinople.
celebrated on the 11th of May 330 CE. He even suggested that this type may have been specially produced for the spartiones, that is the money distributions that took place during the circus parade and games then performed (see Brénot, “Les monnaies,” p. 309). We will come back later to the dating of this type as to the messages that may have been conveyed through it, but first it is important to say a few words about the historical narrative of the foundation of Constantinople.

The date of the 11th of May 330 CE is often presented as being the date of the foundation of the city, however it is an approximation that hides the length of the process that had started in 324 CE. The reconstitution of these various steps is debated, principally because of the fact that most of the sources dealing with these various official steps are much posterior to the events. Santo Mazzarino has proposed that the inauguratio of the site (that is the rites thanks to which a place was freed) took place at the very end of 324 CE. Then there would have been on the 26th November 328 CE the consecratio of the city, which was part of the rites that put an end to the secular character of a place. Finally, on the 30th of May 330 CE, there was the dedicatio, that is the rite that definitively recognised the religious affiliation of the place to its protective deity (see Mazzarino, Antico, tardoantico, p. 127; about the distinction between consecratio and dedicatio, see Lathou, “La consécration,” p. 289-290). Even though the Byzantine tradition according to which Constantinople was dedicated to the Virgin Mary is obviously a later invention, Gilbert Dagron has rightly highlighted the existence of two concurrent traditions that show that the ceremonies of 330 CE must have been a mix of Christian and pagan rites and elements. One should actually distinguish a Christian tradition, conveyed by Eusebius of Caesarea and Sozomen, and according to which Constantinople was dedicated to the God of the martyrs or to the Christ, from another tradition, principally conveyed by later Byzantine narratives as the Chronikon Paschale, which implies that Constantinople may have been dedicated to Rome’s Tuch?, namely that Constantinople, from its foundation, was destined for the benefits of Rome’s fortune (Dagron, La naissance, p. 42).

Lellia Cracco Ruggini has proposed a slightly different chronology. For her at the end of 324 CE, Constantine would have announced his decision to refound a city at the location of Byzantium. Then, on the 26th November 328 CE, would have been performed the ceremony of the limitatio of the new city, that is the delimitation of its new perimeter, followed by the inauguratio. Finally, the 11th of May 330 CE would have been the date of the consecratio and of the dedicatio of the city (Cracco Ruggini, “Il paganismo,” p. 138-141; Cracco Ruggini, “Vettio Agorio Pretestato,” p. 605-610; the date of the 11th of May appears in Consularia Constantinopolitana a. 330, p. 38-39 of Becker, Bleckmann, Gross and NickBakht’s edition). Both Santo Mazzarino and Lellia Cracco Ruggini consider that the inauguratio and the consecratio ceremonies must have been performed in the presence of the pontifex and the augur at that time, that is Vettius Agorius Praetextatus and Sopater, who must have performed the necessary rites (Mazzarino, Antico, tardoantico, p. 127; Cracco Ruggini, “Vettio Agorio Pretestato,” esp. p. 610). The date of the 11th of May then remained the date of Constantinople’s birthday (see Dagron, La naissance, p. 33). Whatever the chronology of these successive ceremonies and whatever Constantine did or did not do during them, it remains important to retain that the foundation of Constantinople must have followed the usual steps and rites prescribed in Roman law for civic foundation. This implied that rites but also upholders of the Roman traditional religion were at the very centre of all these ceremonies, and this even if Constantine and his Christian entourage must have introduced Christian elements or symbols in it (Dagron, La naissance, p. 41-42).

This type was minted in the mint of Constantinople only, which means that the iconography chosen was intrinsically connected to the fate of the new city and reflected the ideological messages that the imperial power wanted to convey regarding its promotion at the rank of capital of the Eastern Empire. Second, this type had been produced by all the eleven officinae (factories) of the mint, meaning thus that it was a massive emission, a point confirmed by the very centre of all these ceremonies and whatever Constantine did or did not do during them, it remains important to retain that the foundation of Constantinople must have followed the usual steps and rites prescribed in Roman law for civic foundation. This implied that rites but also upholders of the Roman traditional religion were at the very centre of all these ceremonies, and this even if Constantine and his Christian entourage must have introduced Christian elements or symbols in it (Dagron, La naissance, p. 33). Whatever the chronology of these successive ceremonies and whatever Constantine did or did not do during them, it remains important to retain that the foundation of Constantinople must have followed the usual steps and rites prescribed in Roman law for civic foundation. This implied that rites but also upholders of the Roman traditional religion were at the very centre of all these ceremonies, and this even if Constantine and his Christian entourage must have introduced Christian elements or symbols in it (Dagron, La naissance, p. 41-42).

Concerning the iconography and the legend chosen, this coin is particularly interesting because, contrary to most of the coins whose obverse bears the imperial effigy, this one bears a representation of the populus Romanus, the Roman people, as stated in the legend. The fact that this personified Roman people is represented as a young man with a cornucopia appearing behind his bust may echo some early representations of the Genius of the Roman people. We think in particular of one of the first appearances of the Genius populi Romani on sestertii minted in the Republican period, in 76-75 BCE (see RRC 393/1a [4]). On this type, the Genius is also represented on the obverse, and appears as a man of an undefined age having a sceptre behind his head. The parallel is more striking with series of sestertii produced in Spain during the civil wars, in 68-69 CE, and bearing on their obverse a portrait of the Genius of the Roman people as a young and beardless man, most of the time with short hair, and having a cornucopia behind his head (RIC I, 2nd ed., Civil wars, Spain, n° 16-22, p. 204-205; see for example [5]).
Constantine had authorised the production of silver coins in 326 CE, in the mint of Rome, probably at the occasion of the celebration of his vicennalia. These coins bear on their reverse the last explicit representation of the Genius of the Roman people. Interestingly, it is represented as the Genius of the Roman people used to be, that is standing, half-naked, holding a cornucopia and having a modius on his head. However, it was deprived of the pagan elements he used to be reproduced with, namely the patera and the altar (see Silver coin depicting Constantine I and the Genius of the Roman people (326 CE) [6]).

A few years later, when Constantinople had been founded and dedicated, Constantine did not authorise the minting of coins referring explicitly to the Genius of the Roman people, but allowed instead a representation of a personified Roman people which remained however clearly influenced by the earlier representation of the Genius of the Roman people (see Callu, Genio populi romani, p. 106). In a different perspective, Claude Brénot has argued that the personified Roman people represented on the obverse of this coin does not have any similarities with its corresponding Genius. Among the arguments he mentions, there is the absence of reference to the Genius in the legend and the fact that the cornucopia appears behind his head and is not hold by the character, as in the case of the Genius of the Roman people (see Bronze depicting Diocletian and the Genius of the Roman people (mint of Antioch, 294 CE) [7]). For Claude Brénot, the fact that this personified Roman people does not hold the cornucopia proves that he does not provide it, nor what it represents, namely plenty and prosperity; rather, this cornucopia goes with the personified Roman people and characterises him (see Brénot, “Les monnaies,” p. 305-306). This remark is true in itself, but the scholar does not discuss the early emissions of the Genius of the Roman people mentioned above that present sticking similarities with the type presented. Of course, the fact that the legend only refers to the Roman people shows that it is clearly a personification of this people which is represented here. Nevertheless, we tend to think that for the major part of the population present at Constantinople who saw these coins and who still believed in Roman gods, this representation must have recalled that of the Genius. We thus tend to interpret this type as being the completion of the process of “depaganisation” of the figure of the Genius of the Roman people that occurred under Constantine.

Concerning the iconography of the reverse of the type presented here, one should note that the obverse at the effigy of the Roman people is here associated with a reverse on which is represented a wreath in which there is a star with eight branches and the mint mark. This image has been variably interpreted by scholars but the most common interpretation is that it may be a dynastic symbol. According to Claude Brénot, it might echo Constantine’s vision at the sanctuary of Apollo at Grand in Gaul, as narrated in the panegyric of Constantine pronounced at Trier in July 310 CE. This passage actually recalls that Constantine had a vision of his protector deity Apollo, accompanied by a Victory, who offered laurel wreaths to him, each one carrying “a portent of thirty years” (see Latin Panegyric VII (6), 21, 4; in that perspective Brénot, “Les monnaies,” p. 308). It is also important to recall that this obverse at the effigy of the Roman people has been also associated with another reverse on which is depicted a bridge over a river (RIC VIII, Constantiopolis, n° 21, p. 448, [8]). This second reverse has been interpreted as representing the bridge of Sucidava [9] on the Danube, which was built by Constantine in 328 CE and opened the way to Dacia. In that perspective, the representation of this bridge on that coin would be a way to praise Constantine for the recent operations he led to reinforce the military defence in the Danubian region and to partially control Dacia (Brénot, “Les monnaies,” p. 307). Alternately, it has also been suggested to associate the minting of this reverse representing a bridge with the victory of the Caesar Constantius II over the Goths in 332 CE (see Calderone, “Costantinopolis,” p. 747, n. 106).

The last question which is important to ask about this coin is related to the interpretation of the legend. What does it mean to produce coins at the effigy of the Roman people at Constantinople? Does it mean that there was an assimilation of the people of Constantinople with the people of Rome?

Many ancient authors who did not witness Constantinople’s foundation, present Constantinople as having been created to equal Rome. For instance, in a passage of the Anonymous Valesianus I, it is written that, by creating Rome, Constantine “wished to make it equal to Rome (et Romae desideravit aequari)” (Anonymous Valesianus I, 30; often called the Origo Constantinii Imperatoris, this source is an anonymous fragmentary Latin text usually dated to the end of the fourth century, with additions during the fifth, even if the original work may have dated from earlier. T.D. Barnes proposes the middle of the fourth century; about the source and its dating, see König, Origo, p. 19-28; Barnes, “Jerome,” p. 158-161). Zosimus, after having narrated how Constantine would have refused to accomplish the traditional sacrifice with the army on the Capitol, probably at the occasion of the closing of his vicennalia celebrated at Rome in July 326 CE, states that Roman milieux were hostile first to his attitude, and that this opposition would have motivated him “to look for a city that would counterbalance Rome (?????? ??????????? ??? ?????? ???????)" (Zosimus, New History II.29.5 and II.30.1; yet Zosimus presents most of Constantine’s actions in a very negative light). Another important and debated point is related to the fact that Constantinople is called in various sources a “second Rome” or a “new Rome”; scholars have debated a lot to know when this assimilation had been officially recognised. Franz Dölger’s thesis that the title “new Rome” was not assigned to Constantinople...
before the council of Constantinople of 381 CE has been today rightly contested (Dölger, “Rom in der Gedankenwelt”; contested in Calderone, “Costantinopoli,” p. 737-740). There are various testimonies that prove that, under Constantine’s reign, the idea that this new city was a second or a new Rome was already present (these testimonies are listed in Dagron, Naisance d’une capitale, p. 45-46; analysed more precisely in Calderone, “Costantinopoli,” p. 733-740). For instance Publius Optatianus Porfírius, in one of his poems which might be dated from 326 CE, writes that the “nobility of the Pontus, second Rome (nobilitas Ponti, altera Roma) had attended the military exploits of the Caesars (Publius Optatianus Porfírius, Carmina, IV.6). He then adds in another passage that Constantinople is the sister (soror) of Rome (Publius Optatianus Porfírius, Carmina, XVIII.34). Second, in Ecclesiastical History I.16.1, the church historian Socrates who lived in the middle of the fifth century narrates that after having built this new city, Constantine would have given it his name and he would have enacted a law that it had to “be called second Rome (??????????? ????????? ??????????)”. This law would have then been engraved on a stele that would have been settled on the place of the great monumental square named the Strategie. There is no reason to dismiss this testimony on the motif that Socrates would mix various events (in that perspective, see Calderone, “Costantinopoli,” p. 740-742; contra Dagron, Naisance d’une capitale, p. 45-46). This testimony, as that of Porfírius, may prove that the qualifying terms of altera Roma, “second Rome,” circulated and may have been granted officially to Constantinople under Constantine’s reign (on this idea see also Grig and Kelly, Two Romes, p. 11; they also quote CTh XIII.5.1 that does not provide however a testimony as convincing as the two sources quoted above; see Calderone, “Costantinopoli,” p. 738-739). There are also some testimonies that attest that this comparison between Constantinople and Rome continued to be made during the fourth century. Before the third canon of the Council of Constantinople of 381 CE in which the honorific pre-eminence of the bishop of Constantinople is justified by the fact that “Constantinople is the new Rome (???? ?? ??????? ??????? ????????? ?? ???????????).” Constantinople is also qualified as a “new Rome” in the speech of the Constantinopolitan ambassador Themistius that he addressed at Rome to Constantius II in 357 CE. In one passage he actually says that Rome and Constantinople share the same fortune (tych?), but also the same name, the old and the new Rome (? ? ??????,?,) (Themistius, Speeches III.42a and 42c). As a consequence, the fact that these coins at the effigy of the Roman people had been minted at the beginning of the 330’s has to be understood as taking part into this assimilation of Constantinople as the “second Rome” that may have been already officially recognised at that time, as attested by Porfírius and by Socrates’s narrative. According to Salvatore Calderone, the formalisation of the equation between Constantine and Rome may have been officially formalised in 332 CE, at the occasion of the introduction of the annona in Constantinople on the 18th of May of that year, a privilege that this city only shared with Rome (see Calderone, “Costantinopoli,” p. 735-737). As rightly recalled by Calderone, it would be wrong to understand the expression “second Rome” as meaning that Constantinople was presented as being a Rome of second rank or as simply existing aside the first and true Rome. The adjectives altera / ????????, on the contrary, should be understood as referring to the idea of novelty and rebirth: to the old Rome was opposed a new, young Rome that fitted in with the Constantinian ideology that glorified Constantine for having succeeded to reunify and pacify, religiously and politically, the whole Empire. This reunification was directly connected to the idea of rebirth (ananeosis/renovatio) of the entire world (see Calderone, “Costantinopoli,” p. 742-743).

The fact that in 330’s, at the time of the minting of this type, the idea that Constantinople was a second Rome was already widespread, and that the type presented here was minted massively but only by the mint of Constantinople, shows that the populus Romanus here named on this bronze type may be the populus of this new Rome. This idea may be confirmed by the fact that this personified Roman people has been intentionally represented as a young man, perhaps to echo the youth of the city of Constantinople (see Calderone, “Costantinopoli,” p. 747). A second element is important to take in consideration to interpret the message of this type, it is the presence of the cornucopia. If it was the usual attribute of the Genius of the Roman people, the fact that it is here associated with the personified Roman people can be interpreted as being an evocation of the introduction of the annona for the population of Constantinople, or at least of the imperial decision announcing its future introduction. The dating of the introduction of the annona has been debated, for Gilbert Dagron, the ceremonies of the 11th May 330 CE and the food distributions that followed would have been the starting point of the settlement of the annona (Dagron, La naissance, p. 305, 314). Yet, various scholars have later argued with reason that the annona had probably been introduced not before 332 CE, probably on the 18th of May of that year following the testimony of the Chronicon Pascale (Chronicon Pascale, ed. Dindorf, vol. 1. p. 531 [10]; Brénot, “Les monnaies,” p. 306, n. 27; followed in Calderone, “Costantinopoli,” p. 747). Thus, the minting of this bronze type at the effigy of the Roman people may have been decided in order to commemorate also the settlement of the annona for the inhabitants of Constantinople, a privilege that was then only shared by the inhabitants of the old Rome. Thus, if the increase of the mobility of the emperors during the Tetrarchical period up to 324 CE had led to a situation in which all the cities of the Empire in which the emperor lived became for a while the centre of the Empire and could be compared to Rome, the fact that Constantinople had been conceived as a second Rome and shared with the Urbs some specific privileges as the annona settled in 332 CE, or the fact of having a Senate, probably instituted in 330 CE (even if it
started to be really effective in the 350’s onwards), shows a clear break with the past situation. By having the emperor and the Senate in its core, and by sharing with Rome some privileges such as the *annona* – the last privilege shared by Rome and Constantinople, the Urban prefecture, was settled in Constantinople in 359 CE – Constantinople deserved to see its people being called the *populus Romanus* (see Dagron, *La naissance*, p. 303; Calderone, “Costantinopoli,” p. 748).

In conclusion, the massive production for one precise occasion – probably for the settlement of the *annona* in 332 CE – of this bronze type of the effigy of a personified Roman people, must have been motivated by two kinds of messages. The first one was relevant for the empire as a whole. Actually, some years after Constantine’s victory over Licinius in 324 CE that had led to the political and religious reunification of the Eastern and Western parts of the Roman Empire, the fact that the mint of Constantinople, the city he had newly founded, produced these coins of the effigy of the Roman people, conveyed a clear oecumenical message. Constantine had succeeded to reunify the Empire and its people. However, the fact that this type had been produced only by the mint of Constantinople shows that it must also have conveyed a more local message. Actually, being minted only in this new city that was already praised and presented at the time of its foundation as being a second Rome, it is clear that these bronze coins conveyed a message addressed to the *populus* of that new city. This message must have consisted of reasserting the equation between the new Constantinople and the old Rome, and in recalling that each of the two populations living in these cities had institutions or privileges that did not exist in the other cities of the Empire (see Calderone, “Costantinopoli,” p. 748).

Keywords in the original language:

- *populus romanus* [11]

Thematic keywords:

- Constantine [12]
- Constantinople [13]
- Roman people [14]
- unity of the empire [15]
- Rome (city) [16]
- cornucopia [17]
- annona [18]
- imperial capital [19]
- second Rome [20]
- new Rome [21]
- universal empire [22]

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**The Column of Constantine** [37]

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Numismatic item

**Bronze depicting Diocletian and the Genius of the Roman people (mint of Antioch, 294 CE)** [7]

Bronze depicting Diocletian and the *Genius* of the Roman people (mint of Antioch, 294 CE)

- [Read more about Bronze depicting Diocletian and the Genius of the Roman people (mint of Antioch, 294 CE)](the_top_of_the_column.jpg) [7]

Numismatic item
Silver coin depicting Constantine I and the Genius of the Roman people (326 CE)
[6]

- Read more about Silver coin depicting Constantine I and the Genius of the Roman people (326 CE) [6]

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