

# Symbolism of the Sphere

by Michael R. Molnar

The title for this article is taken from a book by Otto J. Brendel, a great art historian, who showed that archeological monuments could support literary evidence to yield new perspectives and insight to the meaning of ancient symbols. His essay on the meaning of the sphere that appears on ancient coinage and artwork stands as one of the great pieces of classical scholarship. Using this work along with other sources, I hope to explain further some of the questions raised in Michael Marotta's recent article (The Celator Feb. 1998 p. 18.) about this fascinating subject, namely the symbolism of the sphere.

First of all, the sphere or orb that adorns so many Roman coins has roots in religion and philosophy. The Greeks believed that the universe was divine. Moreover, it was spherical as evident from the apparent shape of the starry sky. The Stoics, in particular, believed that the cosmos controlled all events by a divine fire that was "reason" (logos). Each person's soul was a small flame from the cosmic fire that revealed itself as a divine force, namely Fate. And the Sun and stars manifested that fire. Thus, the orb representing the living, divine universe was held sacred which justifies its representation on coins.

The evidence that the orb depicted on so many coins was the cosmos and not the Earth is revealed first of all by stars and astronomical markings. Close inspection of the orbs sometimes shows not a smooth ball, but bands or hatch marks. On small orbs there appears a letter "X," but on larger orbs, it is recognized as crossed bands that represent the intersection of the all-important zodiac and the celestial equator. The system of circles that the Greeks marked

on the celestial sphere is described in the *Phaenomena* of Aratus, Pliny's *Natural History*, and Manilius' *Astronomica*. The "X" is called the equinoctial cross which represents the spring and autumnal equinoxes (where the Sun crosses the celestial equator). It signified the belief in cosmic cycles of birth, death, and rebirth. (The *Timaeus* of Plato referred to this symbol as a celestial Greek letter "chi.")

The sestertius of Antoninus Pius in Marotta's article is a poor specimen. But I happen to have a better example (fig. 1) that shows that the globe cannot be the Earth. The cornucopia in Italia's hand represents the abundance of the country. Her scepter symbolizes the authority of Italia, probably due to her greatest city, Rome. But the globe has stars and the equinoctial cross. Thus, Italia presiding on the cosmic orb signifies the greatness and immensity of her power. We will return to the power of the orb later, but for now we will focus on the orb's circles.

When a Greek astronomer explained the parts of a celestial globe to his pupils, he used a "radix" or staff to point to the equator, ecliptic (zodiac), constellations, etc. Urania, the muse of astronomy, is often depicted as pointing the radix to a celestial globe on a tripod, which signifies her power over the workings of the cosmos. I have seen some of the Republican denarii of Pomponius Musa (Craw. 410/8) showing Urania pointing her radix to a globe that has a tiny equinoctial cross. This also reveals the incredible skill and attention for detail by a master celator.

Of course, most orbs do not show the equinoctial cross or even stars. Most are smooth, but a few others show a grid that looks like the circles of latitude and longitude of earth globes. Those orbs that look remarkably like a modern geographic globe



Figure 1

are found most commonly on denarii struck by Juba II (SNG Cop. 587) and by Vespasian (RIC 117). On those coins Capricorn, the source of Augustus Caesar's imperial destiny, holds the grid-marked orb. But, the sky, too, had a grid system laid out by Greek astronomers which was used to locate stars and planets on the celestial sphere. We know that the orbs, smooth or with grids, are celestial spheres because of how they are employed in the iconography.

The orb is commonly portrayed as being offered by Sol or Jupiter to the emperor. (Capricorn also offers it to the person born under its control.) Often, the emperor already possess the orb, and holds it outright for everyone to see. A fine example of this is shown in Marotta's article. The significance of these scenes lies in the meaning of the "cosmocrator" - the world holder - or better interpreted as the world ruler. And here "world" is the ancient meaning, namely cosmos, not the modern meaning for Earth. The cosmocrator has deep religious and political meanings. Sol, Mithras, and Jupiter were world rulers because they controlled the workings of the universe and bestowed kingships. Their power was signified by the celestial orb. Thus, an emperor who received the orb from them was blessed as a cosmocrator which gave him the religious and political power to rule ev-

everything. Receiving the orb was another metaphor for power possessed by the emperor- a common theme on Roman coinage.

Nevertheless, as Marotta mused, there is excellent evidence that Greek and Roman scholars knew that the Earth was round, which raises the question whether a round Earth was depicted on coins. However, there was no universal agreement that the Earth was unquestionably round. That is, Ptolemy, Pliny, Seneca, and many others claimed that the Earth is "sensibly" round, but they tell us that the majority of common folk did not accept what navigators and scholars deduced from observation and studies. So, we should not jump to the conclusion that the round Earth was widely accepted as it is nowadays.

In any case, could a spherical Earth be depicted on a coin by the intelligentsia? From the above arguments, we are left with not many examples, if any. Virtually all the orbs on Roman coins are the celestial sphere - the sacred source of power of the cosmocrator. But in my opinion there is one coin that depicts the round Earth. (There may be others, but I prefer this example.) I maintain that the inscriptions using the phrase orbis terrarum (circle of lands) allude to a round Earth. And there is one particular coin that supports this idea.

The coin is RIC 594, a sestertius of Hadrian. The reverse is "RESTITVTORI ORBIS TERRARVM S C. Hadrian standing left, holding roll in left hand, extending right hand to raise towered woman, kneeling left, holding globe." The coin commemorates Hadrian's cancellation of debts which made him "restorer of the earth" because this act greatly benefited the empire's economy. The coin, in my opinion, is likely an example of a round Earth because a celestial orb would not be called orbis terrarum. Also, I do not see an equinoctial cross or stars on this large globe that would easily show such celestial devices. Thus, I believe that this is a good candidate for the depiction of a round Earth.

There is one important side

bar to this discussion. Now we can better appreciate why the globus cruciger appeared on coinage of late antiquity. This is the globe crowned with a Christian cross. The cosmic orb of the Greeks and Romans was indeed a pagan symbol; thus, it had to make way for a Christian symbol. But the cosmic orb could not be abandoned because it had important political symbolism - the power of an emperor. The solution was to remove the equinoctial cross, and supplant that pagan symbol with a Christian one. Placed in the hand of the emperor, the orb with a Christian cross was now sanctified by Christ. Thus, Christ ruled the cosmos, and became the source of power for an emperor.

So, we can see that, although the Earth was regarded as spherical, this was not as important as

acknowledging the power of the spherical cosmos.

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