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Propaganda During the Reign of Emperor Caracalla: The *Warsaw Relief* and Roman Coins from the Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores elements of imperial propaganda during the reign of Caracalla, using the example of the famous *Warsaw Relief* from the Gallery of Ancient Art, as well as Roman coins from the collection of the Department of Coins and Medals at the National Museum in Warsaw. It examines the history and dating of the relief and discusses its analogies. The author analyses iconographic elements such as the crowning, the trophy and captives, as well as the presence of Victoria/*Venus Victrix*, by comparing these motifs with those found in Roman art, imperial and provincial coinage, and their symbolic significance. This paper also presents the figure of Emperor Caracalla and the image he sought to create through propaganda and political manoeuvres. Additionally, it examines the role of Julia Domna in the politics and propaganda of the Severan dynasty. The author demonstrates that all these elements formed part of a coherent strategy, aimed at enhancing the image of an emperor who, according to contemporary historians, was regarded as a tyrant.

KEYWORDS

Emperor Caracalla, Julia Domna, Roman coinage, imperial portraits, *Warsaw Relief*, National Museum in Warsaw, Roman art, history of Rome, Roman reliefs, Roman iconography, imperial symbolism, power and propaganda in ancient Rome, art of the Severan period

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In ancient Rome, the ruler's image was a crucial element of the state's internal policy. It was shaped by various factors, such as organizing public games, customary *congiaria* or the construction of public buildings. Other key influences included works of art and coins featuring scenes and symbols that were widely understood, appealing directly even to the illiterate segments of society, often beyond the borders of the Empire itself. Among such propaganda media are the relief depicting Caracalla, commonly referred to as the *Warsaw Relief*, and Roman coins from the extensive collection of the National Museum in Warsaw. This paper aims to explore the propaganda strategies employed within the internal policy of Emperor Caracalla, using these artefacts as examples.

Propaganda has been used since antiquity, including in the Roman Empire, though it evolved over time. This is reflected, for instance, in imperial titulature. After his victory over Marcus Antonius, Octavian was granted the title *Augustus* by the Senate and became known to the citizens as *Princeps* and *Pater Patriae*. The intention was to present him as a defender of republican values rather than an autocrat.[1] The titulature introduced by Octavian was subsequently adopted by his successors to legitimize their authority. Rulers presented themselves as the *primus inter pares*, the benevolent father of the state, embodying *auctoritas*, and a victorious commander bringing about the *Pax Romana*. Another propagandistic element was the emphasis on imperial virtues: *Virtus*, *Pietas*, *Clementia* and *Liberalitas*. Octavian also initiated the widespread dissemination of the ruler's image across the Empire.[2] The deification of predecessors became a common practice among subsequent emperors. They were portrayed in an idealized manner, albeit with some individual features retained. A notable exception to this rule is the imagery of Nero, which includes more imperfections, such as visible obesity.[3] Important propaganda tools also included triumphal processions and the adoption of honorific titles commemorating victories over external enemies (e.g., *Britannicus*, *Germanicus*).[4] The latter were introduced by Octavian's successors. Caracalla presents a particularly distinctive case, as his propaganda efforts aimed to establish him as the Empire's foremost soldier, highlighting his military affiliations through both his actions and imagery.[5]

The relief depicting Marcus Aurelius Antoninus[6] (born Lucius Septimius Bassianus), commonly known as Caracalla, is one of the most intriguing objects in the Gallery of Ancient Art at the National Museum in Warsaw (fig. 1). It is currently displayed at the centre of the room dedicated to the Roman Empire.

The provenance of the relief remains somewhat mysterious. It entered the National Museum in Warsaw in 1949 after being discovered in the park of Królikarnia (now a branch of the museum) during earthworks aimed at restoring the palace to its former glory. Several theories attempt to explain how the relief found its way to Królikarnia. One suggests that it was part of the collection of the Tomatis family – descendants of Carlo Tomatis, the palace's architect and a chamberlain at the court of King Stanisław August. Another theory proposes that it belonged to Michał Hieronim and Helena Radziwiłł, renowned collectors and patrons of the arts, who purchased Królikarnia in 1816. A third hypothesis links the relief to the collection of Ksawery Pusłowski, who acquired the residence from the Radziwiłłs in 1849 and housed his collection there. Verifying any of these theories is challenging, as historical records describing the collections at Królikarnia are vague and rarely provide distinguishing details about specific artefacts.[7]

During Caracalla's reign, imperial portraits typically followed two distinct types. The first depicted the emperor as patron, a portrayal influenced by the famous *Constitutio Antoniniana* of AD 212, which granted Roman citizenship to nearly all free inhabitants of the Empire. Images of this type were more commonly found in regions corresponding to modern-day Greece and Asia Minor.[8] The second type, in contrast, presented Caracalla as a warrior-emperor, closely tied to his numerous military successes, including victories over the Parthians and Germans, as well as those in Britain. This imagery dominated in the western provinces of the Roman Empire and in Syria. An example of this warrior-emperor portrayal is the *Warsaw Relief*.

The relief was made of blue marble in a provincial workshop, most likely in Syria, around AD 215–216.[9] Its creation can be linked to the emperor's stay in Antioch[10] and the local population's desire to gain his favour. It probably formed part of a larger structure, possibly a triumphal arch or a monument. This is suggested by the slightly slanted edges of the block and the mounting holes on its sides, which would have facilitated its fitting and installation as a relief panel.[11] The central figure of the relief is Caracalla, depicted wearing a plain, form-fitting armour and a woollen military cloak (*paludamentum*). He stands with legs slightly apart, leaning on a trophy with one hand. A distinctive feature of the depiction is the head, which is relatively large with respect to the torso – a characteristic of provincial workshops, whose artworks often exhibit distorted body proportions. The emperor's low forehead, furrowed by two wrinkles, his knitted eyebrows and his characteristic short beard give the figure a stern and menacing expression – something already noted by Cassius Dio.[12] This is a hallmark of Caracalla's portraits, intended to reflect his ruthless and cruel personality.[13] Some of the emperor's most notorious acts include, among others, the murder of his brother,[14] the massacre of Geta's supporters in Rome[15] and the slaughter of the inhabitants of Alexandria.[16] Cassius Dio described Caracalla's character as follows: 'Antoninus belonged to three races; and he possessed none of their virtues at all, but combined in himself all their vices; the fickleness, cowardice, and recklessness of Gaul were his, the harshness and cruelty of Africa, and the craftiness of Syria, whence he was sprung on his mother's side'.[17]

fig. 1 *Relief Showing Caracalla*, AD 215–216, marble, National Museum in Warsaw
photo National Museum in Warsaw

fig. 2 Caracalla, Rome, AD 213, *denarius*, National Museum in Warsaw
photo National Museum in Warsaw

fig. 3 Caracalla, Edessa, AD 211–217, tetradrachm, National Museum in Warsaw
photo National Museum in Warsaw

His facial features can also be easily identified through comparative analysis with portraits of the emperor on Roman coins, both imperial and provincial. One good example, among others, is the *denarius* of Caracalla from the National Museum in Warsaw,[18] minted in Rome in AD 213 (fig. 2).[19] The obverse of the coin shows the emperor's head facing right, wearing a laurel wreath, with his characteristic short beard and furrowed brow. The encircling inscription reads: *ANTONINVS PIVS AVG BRIT*, highlighting his imperial title *Britannicus*. The reverse depicts a standing, left-facing nude Hercules, draped with a lion's skin over his shoulder, holding a club and a branch. The encircling inscription reads: *P M TR P XVI COS IIII P P*. A similar portrait, but struck in the style characteristic of the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, appears on a tetradrachm from Edessa in Mesopotamia[20] (fig. 3). Its obverse also features Caracalla's bust with his distinctive traits. Additionally, he is depicted wearing armour and has a laurel wreath on his head. The encircling inscription reads: *AV K M A ANTΩNEINOC CEB*. In both cases, the titulature was meant to emphasize the ruler's membership in the Antonine dynasty.

Depicting the emperor in military attire was a propagandistic strategy aimed at presenting him as a capable commander who shared the hardships of war with his soldiers.[21] This was an attempt to gain favour with the military, as Caracalla sought to base his rule on the army after murdering his brother.[22]

On the right side of the relief stands Julia Domna, the wife of Septimius Severus and the mother of Caracalla and Geta. She was the Roman empress who held the greatest number of titles in the history of Rome.[23] From AD 193, she was referred to as *Augusta*. During Septimius Severus's conflict with Pescennius Niger, she received the title *Mater Castrorum*, becoming the protector of the army,[24] which to some extent increased the soldiers' loyalty to Severus.[25] Subsequently, from AD 196, she was titled *Mater Caesaris*, from AD 198 *Mater Augusti et Caesaris* and from AD 209 *Mater Augustorum*.[26] On the relief, she stands in a pose mirroring that of the emperor, resting her weight on her right leg. With her raised right hand, she crowns Caracalla with a laurel

fig. 4 Julia Domna, Rome, AD 211–217, *denarius*, National Museum in Warsaw
photo National Museum in Warsaw

wreath – a symbol of victory – while in her left hand she holds a palm branch. She is dressed in a tightly fitted, sleeveless, draped tunic that clings to her waist, revealing the contours of her body.[27] This allegorical representation of the empress as Victoria and *Venus Victrix* aligns with the dynastic propaganda of the Severan family, in which these deities embodied the victories achieved by the emperors.[28] This theme was also reflected in Roman coinage, where Julia Domna was portrayed not only as Victoria and Venus, but also as Vesta and Diana.[29] Additionally, there are known examples depicting her as Selene and Cybele,[30] similar to the earlier representations of Faustina the Elder, the wife of Antoninus Pius. This was an attempt to legitimize Severan rule by presenting their dynasty as the rightful successors of the Antonines.[31] Coins bearing the legend *IVLIA AVGVSTA* were minted from AD 195 onwards.[32] The exceptionally strong political position of Julia Domna during Caracalla's sole reign is evident in a notable change in her titulature on coins after AD 211, when *IVLIA AVGVSTA* was replaced with *IVLIA PIA FELIX AVGVSTA*,[33] as seen on a silver *denarius*[34] from AD 216 (fig. 4), among others.[35] Previously, such titulature was reserved exclusively for emperors (*Augusti*). The purpose of this change was to emphasize the high status of a deified individual and the person accompanied by the deity – this was most often the emperor himself, who was typically depicted without divine attributes,

fig. 5 *The Emperor with a Personification of the Roman People or Senate*, Aphrodisias, marble, Aphrodisias Museum
photo © Dick Osseman

fig. 6 Trajan, Rome, AD 103–111, *denarius*, National Museum in Warsaw
photo National Museum in Warsaw

fig. 7 Marcus Aurelius, Rome, AD 176–177, *dupondius*, National Museum in Warsaw
photo National Museum in Warsaw

making the imagery more acceptable to Roman society.[36] These are examples of assimilation, a process in which a human figure – in this case, a woman from the imperial family – was equated with a deity.[37]

On the left side of the relief, there is a trophy mounted on a wooden trunk. It consists of a cloak and elements of military equipment, including a shield, a double-headed axe and possibly a *falx*. At its base, two bearded captives are seated, one of whom is wearing a Phrygian cap. They lack distinct ethnic characteristics, but they likely symbolize the emperor's victories over barbarians, both in the East and West of the Empire. Although, in this case, the captives do not possess identifiable features that would allow for the precise identification of Caracalla's enemies, they are generally interpreted as a reference to his military successes and the titles he was awarded, such as *Parthicus Maximus*, *Germanicus Maximus*, *Arabicus* (*Maximus*) and *Adiabenicus* (*Maximus*)[38] – which are also found in numismatic sources, for example. This interpretation is supported by historical events, particularly Caracalla's wars against the Alamanni (AD 213) and the beginning of his Parthian campaign (AD 216). Based on inscriptions from numismatic sources, it is possible to identify the captives as a German (inscription: *ANTONINVS PIVS AVG GERM*)[39] and a Parthian (reverse legend: *PART MAX PONT TRP V*).[40] The motif of bound captives carried significant propaganda value. It allowed viewers to see the results of the Empire's military and financial efforts with their own eyes, instilling a sense of pride.[41] At the same time, it served as a warning, demonstrating the fate that awaited the enemies of the *Augustus*.

There are several analogies to the *Warsaw Relief* in which the emperor is crowned with a wreath. Among them, particularly noteworthy are three reliefs from the Sebasteion in

fig. 8 Septimius Severus, Rome, AD 201, *denarius*, National Museum in Warsaw photo National Museum in Warsaw

Aphrodisias, dating to the mid-first century AD and now part of the Aphrodisias Museum collection. The first one depicts Augustus being crowned by Nike. Between them stands a trophy, beneath which sits a bound captive, facing away from the viewer. At the emperor's feet stands an eagle with its wings spread. The second relief portrays the emperor as a nude warrior, crowned by the Genius of the Senate/Roman People, who is dressed in a toga (fig. 5). The third relief shows Nero, crowned by his mother, Agrippina the Younger, who is depicted as the goddess Roma/Concordia, holding a cornucopia.[42] Another example that fits within a similar narrative is the relief on the Arch of Trajan in Benevento, erected in AD 114, where the emperor is crowned by Victoria.[43] In all of these depictions, the crowning act is the central element, designed to present the reigning emperor as a victorious leader, the only rightful person to wield power. This motif was also present in Roman coinage, appearing on coins of Trajan[44] (fig. 6) and[45] Caracalla, among others, [46] and even surviving into the period of Christian dominance, as seen in the coinage of Emperor Arcadius.[47]

In ancient Greece, a *tropaeum* (trophy) was a symbolic offering to the gods, made in gratitude for a victory. Initially, it consisted of pieces of enemy armour mounted on a tree or a post.[48] It was erected at the site where a decisive moment in battle occurred, marking the enemy's defeat. Thucydides describes this practice in his *History of the Grecian War*: 'and he knew that his side had gotten the victory, but expired shortly after. When Clearidas with the rest of the army were returned from pursuit of the enemy, they rifled those that were slain and erected a trophy'.[49]

During the Roman period, trophies made of marble or metal were also erected in the capital, eventually evolving into monumental structures. A prime example of such a monument is the *Tropaeum Traiani*, located about 60 km from Constanța in southeastern Romania. It was built to commemorate Trajan's victory over the Dacian king Decebalus in AD 102. Designed in the Hellenistic tradition by the architect Apollodorus of Damascus, it was constructed and dedicated in AD 109 to *Mars Ultor* (Mars the Avenger).[50] The trophy motif also appeared in reliefs decorating Roman buildings, including: the relief from the Temple of Apollo Sosianus on the Campus Martius, Trajan's Column[51] and the Arch of Septimius Severus in Rome.[52]

The motif of the trophy and captives frequently appeared in Roman coinage, from the time of the Republic until the fourth century AD. The holdings of the National Museum in Warsaw include, for example, a silver *denarius*[53] of Julius Caesar[54] from 46–45 BC. The reverse of this coin features a trophy composed of a cloak and two shields, beneath which sit two bound captives with their backs turned to each other. Below them is the inscription *CAESAR*. A similar composition appears on a bronze *dupondius*[55] of Marcus Aurelius (fig. 7), minted in AD 176–177, where a Germanic man and woman are depicted in the same position.[56] Their ethnicity is indicated by the inscription *DE GERM* on the lower part of the reverse. A *denarius* of Septimius Severus[57] from AD 201 also depicts

fig. 9 *Eucharistic Victoria*, 4th c. AD, mosaic, Basilica of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, Aquileia
photo © YukioSanjo

two bound captives beneath a trophy, who notably wear Phrygian caps (fig. 8).[58] Thanks to the inscription *PART MAX P M TR P VIIII* on the reverse, the captives can be identified as Parthians. Coins of Constantine the Great, minted in Trier in AD 320, continue this motif, showing bound captives beneath a banner inscribed with *VOT / XX*.[59] The legend around the coin praises the soldiers' valour: *VIRTVS EXERCIT*.[60]

The goddess Victoria remained a constant figure in Roman iconography throughout the entire existence of the Empire. The motif of the emperor being crowned by Victoria frequently adorned Roman buildings and monuments. The most famous examples include the relief on the Arch of Septimius Severus, erected in AD 203 in Leptis Magna, Libya,[61] and the aforementioned Trajan's Column. This imagery persisted even when Christianity became the dominant religion in the Roman Empire. During this period, religious syncretism is observed in art, where elements of traditional Roman beliefs are depicted alongside Christian symbols. A fascinating example from this period is a mosaic from the Basilica of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Aquileia, dated to the fourth century AD (fig. 9). It depicts a winged Victoria, standing and facing left, holding the traditional Roman symbols of victory: a laurel wreath and a palm branch. At her feet, however, appear objects associated with Christianity: a basket of bread and a chalice of wine, symbolizing the Eucharist.[62]

An analysis of these examples shows that propaganda played a crucial role in Caracalla's political strategy. Every propaganda effort was part of a coherent strategy. The scene on the *Warsaw Relief*, along with the motifs and titulature on coins, demonstrates that Caracalla's propaganda was deeply rooted in Roman tradition. This is evident from its presence in both earlier and later works of art, as well as in coinage. Propaganda was a key element of the Empire's internal politics, in which the emperor presented himself as both a companion to his soldiers and a skilled, victorious commander.

This message was reinforced not only through his military attire but also by the presence of Victoria in his immediate surroundings. Depicting Julia Domna as a goddess of victory further elevated the emperor's prestige, visually highlighting his divine connections and the gods' favour toward him. Additionally, symbols that were easily recognizable to Roman society – such as the trophy, wreath and bound captives – were designed to convince viewers of the ruler's great deeds, and his stern facial features were intended to underscore his strength and character.

Translated by Aleksandra Szkudłapska

NOTES

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

RIC II – Mattingly Harold, Sydenham Edward Allen, *Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. 2, *Vespasian to Hadrian* (London, 1926).

RIC III – Mattingly Harold, Sydenham Edward Allen, *Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. 3, *Antoninus Pius to Commodus* (London, 1930).

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RRC – Crawford Michael Hewson, *Roman Republican Coinage* (Cambridge, 1975).

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