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Séxtilia Mother of Vitellius: an imaginary portrait

John Melville Jones

In 1969/70 I spent the greater part of a year in London, and would occasionally go to Seaby, Baldwin and Spink, looking for ancient coins that I liked and could afford (a difficult combination of requirements). In the course of these explorations I acquired some splendid sestertius-sized brass coins which were not genuine ancient pieces, and were therefore much cheaper. Most of them were late restrikes from dies made to imitate Roman imperial sestertii by Giovanni da Cavino of Padua. Then there was a supposed coin of Julius Caesar bearing the reverse legend VENI VIDI VICI (probably not by Cavino, although it has sometimes been attributed to him), and another of Homer. Finally there was a smaller brass coin up to 3 cm in diameter (weight 17.6 g), showing a female portrait with the legend SEXTILIA A VITELLII MATER on the obverse, and a hexastyle temple on the reverse, with the letters S(enatus) C(onsulto) bracketing the temple, and S(enatus) P(opulus)Q(ue) R(omanus) underneath the steps of the building.



Fig. 1: Imaginative Coin of Sextilia, 17,6 g, 30 mm (Photo: Richard Small).

The emperor Vitellius certainly did have a mother called Sextilia, a lady of distinguished background about whom the ancient historians had some stories to tell, but the fabric of the coin is not sufficiently close to the style of Roman coins of the first century A.D. for it to be a genuine ancient piece. So I realised that it must be classed as an imaginative creation, possibly to be dated to the 16th or 17th centuries, when a number of books offered alleged portraits of famous figures of the past, mixing genuine representations based on coins or works of sculpture with representations of ‘medals’ of persons who existed only in mythology.

A search of publications of this kind did indeed lead to the discovery of three portraits resembling the obverse of this coin. The earliest is to be found in a work entitled *Illustrium Imagines* (Rome 1517), written or at least edited by Andrea Fulvio. Although the portrait of Sextilia resembles the portrait on the coin (but faces in the opposite direction), the legend encircles the whole circumference of the portrait, whereas on the coin the draped bust occupies the area at the bottom.

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Fig. 2: Portrait of Sextilia from Andrea Fulvio, *Illustrium Imagines* (Rome, 1517).

The second, which reproduces the design of Fulvio's portrait almost exactly, but presents it as the reverse of a coin which has as its obverse type an imaginary portrait of Sextilia's husband, the elder Vitellius, the emperor's father, appears in a book entitled *Epitome Thesauri Antiquitatum*, written by Giacompo Strada and published in Lyon in 1553.

The third, also published at Lyon in the same year, and written by Guillaume Rouillé, is the *Promptuaire des medailles des plus renommées personnes qui ont este depuis le commencement du monde*. This contains on page 29 a portrait of Sextilia, again facing to the left, that is closer to the image featured on the coin illustrated above, although the legend contains two small mistakes.



Fig. 3: Portrait of Sextilia from Guillaume Rouillé, *Promptuaire des medailles des plus renommées personnes qui ont este depuis le commencement du monde* (Lyon, 1553).

It is not possible to say with certainty whether the drawing in Rouillé's book inspired the creation of the coin, or whether the existence of the coin led to the portrayal of Sextilia in this slightly revised form. The alteration of the direction in which the head faces might be explained by saying that the drawing was used for the engraving of a die which created a coin which faced in the opposite direction. On the other hand, if the coin inspired the illustration in the book, the same

reversal may have occurred. And perhaps it is more likely that the mistakes in the legend in the printed version were the result of a miscopying from the coin. At any rate, whichever of these suggestions is correct, we can suggest a date in the middle of the 16th century for the making of the coin, a very appropriate time for this imaginative piece to have been created, when the European renaissance was at its height, and artists and writers and builders and rulers were all striving to 'equal the ancients' in every possible way.

It is also not possible to assign authorship to it, since it is certainly not in the manner of artists known to have made imitations of ancient coins such as Giovanni da Cavino or Valerio Belli. The portrait of Sextilia may have been inspired by a head of Vesta on a Republican denarius issued in 69 B.C. for P. Sulpicius Galba (Crawford, RRC 406/1), but the resemblance is not close. The reverse type of a hexastyle temple with a wider central intercolumniation has also only some approximate equivalents, the nearest being on sestertii of Hadrian or Faustina I.¹ Also, it has no meaning that can be associated with Sextilia, so it must have been created only to suggest a Roman identity for the coin.

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1 RIC Hadrian 783 (although this temple is decastyle with equal intercolumniations) and Antoninus Pius 1148. I am grateful to Christian Schinzel and Richard Abdy for suggesting these possible models for the reverse of the coin.