

DISSERTATIONES ARCHAEOLOGICAE

ex Instituto Archaeologico Universitatis de Rolando Eötvös nominatae



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The Biesheim cameo – a reinterpretation

LAJOS JUHÁSZ

*Institute of Archaeological Sciences
Eötvös Loránd University
jlajos3@gmail.com*

Abstract

In this paper I will analyse in depth the Biesheim cameo to which only minor attention was paid until now. There are still some parts of the interpretation that do not fit well together. This is why I have tried to undertake a thorough iconographic analysis that resolved in a new interpretation. In my opinion, the defeated enemy on the cameo can only be Armenia, instead of a Quadic king. Then again the rider is not likely to be Commodus, as previously thought, but rather Lucius Verus. This theory is also supported by a number of personifications of Armenia that were frequent in this period.

The small town of Biesheim (*Argentovaria*) in Alsace, France has yielded an exceptional cameo of red agate (*Fig. 1*). Its particularity lies not only in its size (5 × 3.2 cm), but also in its representation and fine style.¹ This very interesting, but not very well known piece was until now interpreted differently by scholars. In this paper, my aim is to reanalyse the cameo, and present a somewhat different explanation of my own.

The style of the representation dates the gem to the 2nd century AD, but it is set in a golden hairpin from the 4th–5th century AD.² The most interesting part of the cameo is of course the depiction. The biggest part is occupied by a rider on a rearing horse, wearing armour and *paludamentum*. He holds a spear in his left hand, preparing to strike down on a much smaller female figure below the horse. Following a chase she fell to the ground, half on her knees, completely defeated (*Fig. 2*). She holds her left arm up in defence, while she is seeking shelter by a rock with her right. She is only wearing wrinkled trousers and a high peaked cap, her breast are bare, by which she can be certainly identified as a woman.³ Evidently the proportions of the rider outweigh those of the other two participants in the scene: the horse and the defeated enemy. This is also true of the scene's composition, where everything is subordinated to the soldier.

Because of the scene, the great size and quality of the cameo it is reasonable to believe that the rider is a Roman emperor.⁴ These types of depictions propagated the *Virtus Augusti*, and were also common in the 2nd century AD.⁵ On the basis of the portrait he was identified as Commodus, which was since never questioned.⁶

1 BIELLMANN 1988, 17.

2 BIELLMANN 1988, 19–20; PLOUIN 1998, 20.

3 BIELLMANN 1988, 18. For an opposing opinion see SPEIDEL 2000, 193. This was also taken over by CHAUVOT 2008, 158.

4 PLOUIN 1998, 20.

5 LIMC VIII (1997) s.v. *Virtus* 44–54 (Th. Ganschow).

6 However this was done without giving any evidence or parallels, only by stating that the portrait resembles Marcus Aurelius or rather his son (BIELLMANN 1988, 19).



Fig. 1. The Biesheim cameo (after CHAUVOT 2008, 157).

Despite the high-quality of the cameo, the engraver clearly had difficulties to compose the scene in the gem's oval form. Most striking are the outstretched hind legs of the horse, which would mean that the animal would have to rear up much higher. The front legs and tail, as well as the rider's head, left arm, cloak and the ground line, were also all adjusted to the edge of the cameo. These peculiarities also show that the message of the cameo was more important than the small details of its engraving.

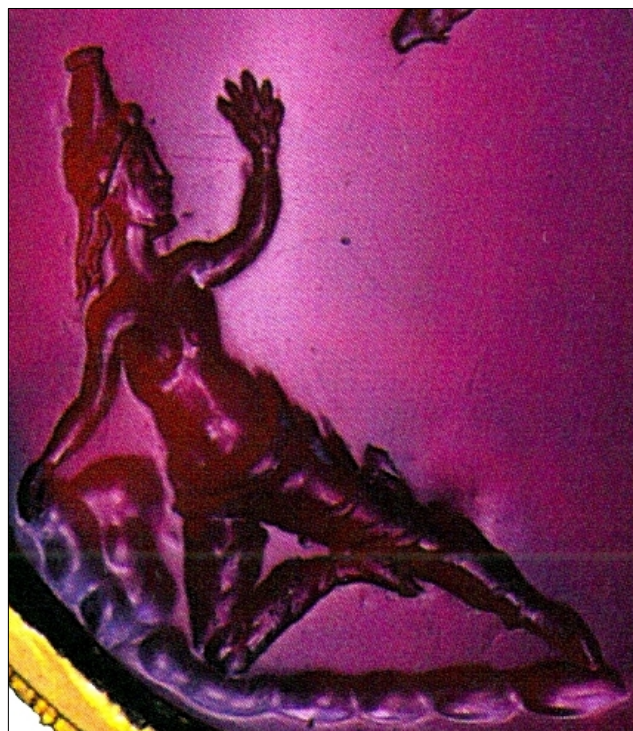


Fig. 2. The Biesheim cameo (detail).

In my point of view the key to this cameo is the defeated figure. P. Biellmann rightly sees her as a woman, opposed to M. P. Speidel, who considers her to be the king of the *Quadi*.⁷ The latter's arguments are based on e.g. that the rider's nipples are larger than those of the kneeling figure, who is more than one third smaller than he is. Furthermore he sees the figure bearded, although there is no trace of it on the cameo. However, Speidel rightly observes that trousers are usually worn by men, and that a man is a worthier adversary for an emperor, than a woman. However, what he does not take into consideration is that there were also women depicted in men's clothes, especially personifications of provinces or foreign territories. This again makes female figures suitable for the emperors to personally defeat them.

This way the scene is moved from a realistic representation to an allegoric victory. The next step is to determine, who this woman is by analysing her attributes. There are two things that characterise her: the headgear and the trousers.

The trousers are wrinkled, which is characteristic for foreign people in Roman art. It is not specific for any nation, it just signifies that the person wearing them does not belong to the "civilized" world. Therefore both eastern (Parthians and Armenians) and western (Celts, Germanic and Dacian) enemies are depicted in them (Fig. 3. 1-2).⁸

The other attribute is the woman's headgear, which was interpreted by P. Biellmann as a *modius*.⁹ In this sense he figures that the woman is Epona, a fertility goddess. To make this version plausible, he discards the fact that this is a clear scene of triumph. M. P. Speidel on the other hand sees the headdress as hair, bundled up on top of the head. According to Tacitus, this was emblematic for the *Suebi* (Tacitus, *Germania* 38). This must be rejected, since this was a hairstyle worn by men only.

⁷ BIELLMANN 1988, 18–19; SPEIDEL 2000, 193.

⁸ LANDSKRON 2005, 102; RICHTER 2004, 401–402; *Strabon* 4.4.3; *Polyb.* 2.28, 30.1; Domitian Germania coin: RIC II 69, 72, 77, 83, 90, 103, 11, 127, 164, 184, 202; Trajan Dacia coin: RIC II 89, 216–219, 642.

⁹ He supplements it with seeing a *cornucopia* at her right hand, instead of the rocks (BIELLMANN 1988, 18–19).



Fig. 3. 1. Coin of Lucius Verus depicting a Parthian prisoner (<http://www.acsearch.info/record.html?id=427049>). 2. Defeated Dacia on Trajan's coin (<http://www.acsearch.info/record.html?id=87451>). 3. Coin of Lucius Verus depicting the defeated Armenia (<http://www.acsearch.info/record.html?id=288611>). 4. Medal depicting Lucius Verus erecting trophy with Armenia kneeling underneath (GNECCHI II, Tav. 72/4). 5-6. Coin and medal depicting Lucius Verus on horse, striking down on the personification of Armenia (<http://www.acsearch.info/record.html?id=125385>; GNECCHI II, Tav. 72/5).



Fig. 4. Backside of a bronze bust in München (Archäologische Staatssammlung, Manfred Eberlein)

Secondly there is a part hanging down on the shoulders, which in case of the *Suebi* hair should have been combed forward and tied up in the *nodus* (Fig. 4).¹⁰ Furthermore the gem cutter was clearly skilled enough to emphasize hair magnificently, as on the rider's head, if he intended to. The woman's headgear closely resembles the tiara worn by the personification of *Armenia*. This also fits perfectly with the trousers, in which she is almost always portrayed in.¹¹ The possibility of the Phrygian cap is also to be discarded, because the headdress' front is not hanging down, but is straight.¹² *Armenia* was frequently represented during the eastern campaign in the time of Lucius Verus and Marcus Aurelius (Fig. 3. 3–4).¹³ In fact the same rider representations were frequently employed in this period on coins and medals (Fig. 3. 5–6).¹⁴

So, it can be concluded that the female figure is in all likelihood the personification of *Armenia*. This leads to the reanalysis of the rider itself, since Commodus didn't have any confrontation on the eastern front.¹⁵ Furthermore he struck only one reverse, where he is on horseback defeating an enemy, while his uncle issued numerous.¹⁶ As M. P. Speidel points out Commodus' only "major deed in the field" was the campaign against the *Quadi* in 179.¹⁷ So, to celebrate Commodus as vanquisher of *Armenia* would not be credible and likely at all. In the latter part of the 2nd century AD the only big military confrontation with *Armenia* was the eastern campaign (161–166 AD) led by Lucius Verus, Commodus' uncle.¹⁸ Even though it was not personally himself, who commanded the troops, it was still his victory in the end.¹⁹

10 The *Suebi* heads all show the hair combed forward from the back e.g. KRIEGER 2004, Kat. 3, Taf. 33; Kat. 286, Taf. 39,1; Kat. 289, Taf. 39,2. For more on the *nodus* see KRIEGER 2004, 100–111.

11 This combination of this special headgear and wrinkled trousers can never be seen on the personification of *Germania*, nor on the representations of Germanic people.

12 DNP s.v. *Tiara* 528 (R. Hirschmann). *Armenia* appears with a Phrygian cap on a relief from the Sebasteion of Aphrodisias. The reason for this is that the whole composition is modelled after the Penthesileia representations, where *Armenia* is represented as an amazon, just like the mythological figure (SMITH 1987, 117–120; OSTROWSKI 1990, *Armenia* 9; LIMC VII (1994) s.v. *Penthesileia* 53a (E. Berger)). *Armenia* is also wearing a Phrygian cap on an Alexandrian tetradrachm, where she is tied to a *tropaeum*. In this case it is probable that the coin issuers or die engravers did not know the difference between the tiara and the cap. They just wanted to celebrate the eastern triumphs of Lucius Verus with a conventional image (DATTARI 1901, 3691–3693; HOUGHTALIN 1996, 111/12).

13 RIC III 78–86, 121–122, 498–500, 502–509, 526, 890–892, 1360–1361, 1364–1368; 1408–1411; GNECCHI II, 45/5, 7; OSTROWSKI 1990, *Armenia* 6a. A sitting *Armenia* can also be found on *terra sigillata chiara B* products from Gaul: OSTROWSKI 1990, *Armenia* 10; LIMC II (1984) s.v. *Armenia* 6 (J.-C. Balty); WUILLEUMIER – AUDIN 1952, 98/158; DESBAT 2011, 21/30.

14 RIC III 543–545, 549, 567, 1362–1363, 1402–1407; GNECCHI II, 45/4, 6; OSTROWSKI 1990, *Armenia* 6b.

15 STAHL 1997, 163.

16 RIC III Lucius Verus 543–545, 549, 567, 1362–1363, 1402–1407, Commodus 299.

17 This is also, why he tries to interpret the defeated woman as a man (SPEIDEL 2000, 194).

18 ROSEN 1997, 152. The only other possibility would be Caracalla, some 40 years later, which can be rejected on the basis of style and the portrait.

19 According to the *Historia Augusta* he devoured all the leisure and pleasure the eastern life had to offer. (*Vita Veri* 7, 1–4). Verus later transferred his titles *Armeniacus*, *Medicus* and *Parthicus* to his co-regent Marcus Aurelius. (*Vita Marci* 9, 1–2; KIENAST 1990, 139, 144).



Fig. 5. 1. Mirrored detail of the Biesheim cameo. 2. Coin of Lucius Verus (<http://www.acsearch.info/record.html?id=666374>). 3. Coin of Commodus (<http://www.acsearch.info/record.html?id=657246>).

To get back to the cameo, the rider's portrait is not fully convincing. In fact many times the portraits of Commodus and Lucius Verus look very alike (Fig. 5). Sometimes both are depicted with widely open eyes and considerable nose, like the horseman on the gem. So, it is not that straightforward to determine the emperor simply by its representation, instead it is wiser to take the whole scene into consideration. Thus it is more probable that the Biesheim cameo is an allegoric commemoration of Lucius Verus' triumph over *Armenia*.

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