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**A LETTER OF MICHELE SCHIAVO
DESCRIBING A COIN OF DIDIA CLARA
(PALERMO, EIGHTEENTH CENTURY)**

ANTONINO CRISÀ

1. Introduction

This article examines a letter of Michele Schiavo (1705–1771) which describes a rare coin of Didia Clara (daughter of the Emperor Didius Julianus) he had recently acquired. The document, preserved at the Public Library (*Biblioteca Comunale*) of Palermo,¹ is worthy of study for several reasons. First of all, it is a significant direct account of Sicilian antiquarianism in the eighteenth century, in which Schiavo provides interesting information about his numismatic collecting methods and aims. Moreover, his consultation of Vaillant's numismatic monograph testifies to the use of specific bibliographical references among Sicilian antiquarians of the eighteenth century.²

Luigi Boglino (1850–1917), the custodian of the Public Library of Palermo at the end of the nineteenth century, published a brief description of this document. Boglino, a paleographer, attributed the manuscript to Michele Schiavo because he recognized the handwriting. Boglino's note seems to be the only bibliographical source about this document.³

¹ BCPA, Qq G 36, n. 34.

² R. Equizzi, *Palermo, San Martino delle Scale: la collezione archeologica. Storia della collezione e catalogo della ceramica*, Rome 2006; A. Crisà, "G. L. Castelli, principe di Torremuzza, numismatico ed antichista ad *Halaesa Archonidea*", *LANX* 2: 2 (2009) 116–49; A. Crisà, "Lettera di Girolamo Bonanno Chiaramonte su una moneta d'oro di Costantino IV (Caltagirone, 1745)", *RIN* 112 (2011) (forthcoming).

³ L. Boglino, *I manoscritti della Biblioteca Comunale di Palermo*, Palermo 1884–1900, I, 94: "Lettera sopra un'antica medaglia di *Didia Clara Aug.* – Ms. del sec. XVIII, di carattere di

Michele Schiavo, brother of Domenico (1719–1773),⁴ was born on 7 February 1705 in Palermo and he died on 1 December 1771. A learned prelate and an expert in ecclesiastical history, he was Provincial Inquisitor. He was elected canon of Palermo Cathedral in 1740 and afterwards he was bishop of Mazara del Vallo from 1766 to 1771. The most significant of Schiavo's books were *Dissertazione storico-dogmatica de subiectione Siciliae Patriarchae romano* (1733) and *Dissertazione storico-dogmatica della patria, santità e dotrina del pontefice S. Agatone* (1751). However, many of his works remain in manuscript; they were deposited at the Public Library of Palermo after his death, where they are still preserved.⁵

2. Description of the coin

There is no illustration of the coin of Didia Clara in Schiavo's letter.⁶ Instead, Schiavo expected that the addressee would be able to identify it from the specific bibliographical reference given in his letter (Fig. 1). Schiavo gave the reference to this coin from Jean Foy Vaillant's numismatic catalogue, *Numismata imperatorum romanorum praestantiora a Julio Caesare ad Posthumum et tyrannos*, first published in Paris in 1692 (Fig. 2). This was probably because that catalogue was owned by the addressee of the letter or, at least, because it was a popular text among the Sicilian collectors of the eighteenth century. The use of a numismatic monograph derived from the scholarship of French antiquarianism is not surpris-

Michele Schiavo, in-fog. Sta nel volume segnato Qq G 36, n. 34". The manuscript is realised on two façades. Unfortunately, the name of the addressee and date are not included.

⁴ Domenico Schiavo obtained a bachelor degree in civil law. A canon of Palermo Cathedral and a member of the *Accademia del Buon Gusto*, well known among Sicilian intellectuals of the eighteenth century, he was concerned with letters, archaeology and natural sciences. G. M. Mira, *Bibliografia siciliana ovvero gran dizionario bibliografico*, Palermo 1875–1881, II, 339–41; A. Pavolini, *Dizionario dei siciliani illustri*, Palermo 1939, 409; G. Giarrizzo, *Cultura e economia nella Sicilia del '700*, Caltanissetta 1992, 64, 68.

⁵ J. Levesque de Burigny, *Storia generale di Sicilia del Signor De Burigny, tradotta dal francese, illustrata con note, addizioni, tavole cronologiche, e continuata fino a' nostri giorni, dal signor Mariano Scasso e Borrello*, Palermo 1788, 114: the French historian mentions the monograph of Michele Schiavo, *De subiectione Siciliae Patriarchae* (1735); Mira (above n. 4) II, 341; Boglino (above n. 3) IV, 139–140; Pavolini (above n. 4) 409.

⁶ The design of the coin in Fig. 1, is drawn from the monograph of Vaillant (Fig. 2).

ing, because French culture was greatly appreciated in Sicilian intellectual and academic circles in the eighteenth century.⁷



Fig. 1: Coin of Didia Clara with standing Hilaritas (Æ).
From Vaillant (n. 10), 108.

It is clear that particular numismatic catalogues were widely accepted in certain geographical areas and historical periods. For example, Girolamo Chiaramonte Bonanno (1702–1759) used the monograph of J. Oisellius, *Thesaurus selectiorum numismatum antiquorum* (1677) in 1745, when he had to identify a gold coin of Constantine IV.⁸ Among Sicilian coin collectors of the first half of the nineteenth century, one of the most appreciated and widespread catalogues was the *Siciliae populorum urbium regum et quoque et tyrannorum veteres nummi Saracenorum epocham antecedentes* (1781). It was written by Gabriele Lancillotto Castelli (1727–1792), Prince of Torremuzza, and published ten years after the death of Schiavo. This monograph was owned and used by the ancient coin collector Enrico Pirajno (1809–1864) and some of his correspondents.⁹

It is possible to find the bibliographical reference given by Schiavo in Vaillant's *Numismata imperatorum romanorum praestantiora* (Figure 2). Jean Foy Vaillant (1632–1701) is rather important in the history of antiquarian studies of the seventeenth century, especially for his detailed numismatic catalogues. After he had first pursued the study of law, and then started a medical school, Vaillant,

⁷ L. Tomeucci, *Storia della Sicilia*, Messina 1955, 152–3; Giarrizzo (above n. 4) 9–58.

⁸ Crisà 2011 (above n. 2).

⁹ A. Crisà, "Lettera su alcune monete di Tindari", *Cronaca Numismatica* 201 (2007) 66–8; Crisà 2009 (above n. 2), 116–49; A. Crisà, "Lettera di Antonino Restivo Navarro al barone Enrico Pirajno di Mandralisca con due repertori numismatici", *RIN* 110 (2009) 521–32. Enrico Pirajno received two letters from Giuseppe Grosso Cacopardo and Antonino Restivo Navarro, who catalogued some coins with Castelli's *Siciliae populorum*.

who was already devoted to numismatics, met Colbert, the prime minister of the French King Louis XIV. Colbert financed Vaillant to travel in Italy and Greece and to buy coins for the royal collection. Vaillant received official acknowledgment for his numismatic research in 1702, when he became a member of the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*.¹⁰

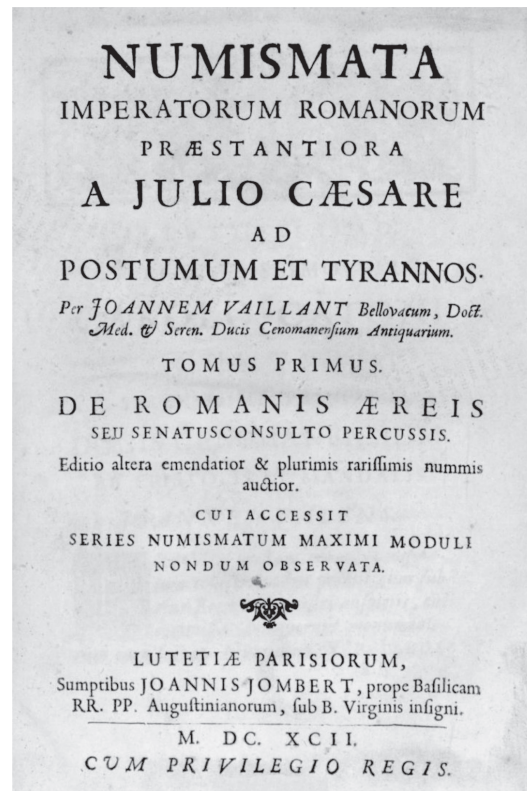


Fig. 2: Title page of *Numismata imperatorum Romanorum praestantiora* (1692) by J. F. Vaillant (n. 10).

Schiavo describes the coin of Didia Clara clearly. Firstly, the "medaglia di seconda grandezza" is examined for its physical characteristics. In fact, the author indicates the coin's size generically, according to the usual procedure of antiquar-

¹⁰ J. F. Vaillant, *Numismata imperatorum Romanorum praestantiora a Julio Caesare ad Postumum et tyrannos. De Romanis aereis seu senatusconsulto percussis. Editio altera emendatior et plurimis rarissimis nummis auctior, cui accessit series numismatum maximi moduli nondum observata*, Lutetiae Parisiorum 1692, 108. However, M. Schiavo wrote "f. 104". It is probably a compilation error or, alternatively, Schiavo used a different edition of the work. C. E. Dekesel, "Jean Foy-Vaillant (1632–1706): the antiquary of the King", in P. Berghaus, *Numismatische Literatur 1500–1864. Die Entwicklung der Methoden einer Wissenschaft*, Wiesbaden 1995, 47–56.

ian studies. Schiavo also analyses the coin's obverse, indicating the main elements which contribute to the identification of a coin of Didia Clara ("la testa di tal Principessa con attorno la legenda DIDIA CLARA AVG").

It is also interesting to note how the scholar uses one detail of Didia Clara's head in order to identify the coin, according to its size.¹¹ This comparison could derive from the monograph of Vaillant or alternatively from a direct examination of a similar coin, which perhaps Schiavo himself or another collector owned.

The figure on the reverse is clearly recognised by the scholar; it is a woman with a palm branch in her right hand and a *cornucopia* in her left hand ("una donna con ramo di palma nella destra, e col corno dell'abbondanza nella sinistra"). The reading of the legend is partial ("HILA ...E...P..."), because some portions are corroded, as probably are the letters S-C. However, according to the author, the complete legend is "*Hilaritas Temporum*".¹²

3. Identification of the coin

It is now necessary to hypothesise about the denomination of the coin, which Schiavo does not mention. In fact it is a *dupondius* or an *as* of Didia Clara (*RIC* n. 21)¹³ (Fig. 3), as we can infer from significant elements of its description.

¹¹ In fact, Schiavo writes: "[La medaglia] da quelle di prima grandezza si differisce alquanto nell'acconciatura de' capelli".

¹² Schiavo tries graphically to reconstruct the letters of the legend, which have partially survived the corrosion. He also uses some points, in order to indicate the gaps. However, the correct legend is HILAR TEMPOR S-C on the reverse of Didia Clara's coins (*Æ*) with *Hilaritas*. Since Schiavo was probably unable to find the last parts of the legend, he does not propose the abbreviated form, so he writes "*Hilaritas Temporum*".

¹³ Didius Julianus for Didia Clara, *Æ dupondius* or *as*, Rome 193 AD. Obv/DIDIA CLARA AV[G]; draped bust right; Rev/HILA[R] [T]E[M]P[OR] / [S-C]; *Hilaritas*, standing left with a long dress, holding a *cornucopia* in her left hand and a palm branch in her right hand; Vaillant (above n. 10), 108; F. A. Zaccaria, *Istituzione antiquario-numismatica, o sia introduzione allo studio delle antiche medaglie*, Venezia 1793, 321: Schiavo just mentions a coin of "second size"; J. Eckhel, *Doctrina numorum veterum, conscripta a Josepho Eckhel, thesauro caesareo numorum, gemmarumque veterum, et rei antiquariae in Universitate Vindobonensi docendae praefecto. Pars II. De moneta Romanorum. Volumen VII. Continens numos imperatorios ab Antonino Pio usque ad imperium Diocletiani*, Vindobonae 1828, 151; V. N. Scotti, *Della rarità delle medaglie antiche di tutte le forme e di tutti i metalli divise in tre classi*, Roma 1838, 275; H. Cohen, *Description historique des monnaies frappées sous l'Empire Romain, communément appelées médailles impériales*, Paris 1883, III, 403, n. 5; H. Mattingly – E. A.



Fig. 3: Didius Julianus for Didia Clara, Æ dupondius, Rome 193 AD. Obv/Draped bust right; Rev/Hilaritas standing (Ø 28 mm; 16.19 g). From Baldwin's Auctions Ltd, Dmitry Markov Coins & Medals, M&M Numismatics Ltd, *The New York Sale XIV*, Auction 10th January 2007, lot n. 327.

Marcus Severus Didius Julianus came to power after the murder of Pertinax on 28 March 193 AD and he was killed in June of the same year, while Septimius Severus marched towards Rome. During his short reign as emperor, Julianus struck coins in the mint of Rome for his wife Manlia Scantilla and his daughter Didia Clara. The coins were minted in gold (*aureus*), silver (*denarius*), *orichalcum* (*sestertius*, *dupondius*) and copper (*as*).¹⁴

First of all, we have to exclude the coin of Schiavo being of gold or silver, but it is certainly a bronze coin, because it is corroded ("quantunque il rimanente sia corroso [...]").¹⁵ Moreover, the numismatic catalogue of Vaillant, which is expressly used by Schiavo, is dedicated to the bronze Roman coins from Julius Caesar to Postumus. Finally, the author follows the eighteenth-century antiqua-

Sydenham, *The Roman Imperial Coinage. Vol. IV. Part I. Pertinax to Geta*, London 1936, 18, n. 21; H. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum. Volume V. Pertinax to Elagabalus*, Oxford 1950, 18, n. 41A; D. R. Sear, *Roman coins and their values*, London 1974, 175, n. 1622. We do not know if Michele Schiavo describes a *dupondius* or an *as*, because he does not provide sufficient information.

¹⁴ Eckhel (above n. 13) 147–51; Cohen (above n. 13) III, 398–403; Mattingly, Sydenham (above n. 13) 13–8; Mattingly (above n. 13) LXIX–LXXVI, 11–8; Sear (above n. 13) 174–5; E. Montenegro, *Monete imperiali romane: con valutazione e grado di rarità*, Turin 1988, 192–4.

¹⁵ M. Angelini – O. Colacicchi, "Pulitura e conservazione delle monete provenienti da scavo", *BNum* 44/45 (2005) 275–86 (277, 291–4): corrosion typically affects bronze coins.

rian tradition in indicating the size of the coin. The expression "di seconda grandezza" was especially used to refer to Roman bronze coins at that time.¹⁶

To this end, it is necessary to examine a page of Francesco Antonio Zaccaria's technical handbook, *Istituzione antiquario-numismatica, o sia introduzione allo studio delle antiche medaglie* (1772), in order to illustrate the measurement system of coin size, which was not yet based on the nineteenth-century Mionnet scale. The first edition of Zaccaria's monograph was published shortly after the death of Schiavo, but it was certainly consistent with the antiquarian and numismatic research methods of the second half of the eighteenth century.¹⁷

Zaccaria observed that the Roman Imperial bronze coins were divided into three categories, according to their diameter (first, second and third size). The "yellow bronze" of the first size was probably *orichalcum* (Or). The second and third size coins were struck with "mixed bronze" (*Æ*). He also specified that the dimension and relief of the emperor's head could be used to establish the coin size. As Zaccaria noted in his handbook, this numismatic scale was sometimes rather arbitrary, because it depended on the subjective evaluation of the coin collector. A similar system, which was used to indicate the size of bronze coins, was employed in the *Doctrina numorum* (1792–1798) by Joseph Eckhel and it was subsequently adopted in the numismatic handbook *Della rarità delle medaglie antiche di tutte le forme e di tutti i metalli divise in tre classi* (1838) by Natale Vincenzo Scotti.¹⁸

¹⁶ Zaccaria (above n. 13), 43: "Le medaglie Imperiali di bronzo, oltre i medaglioni or ora accennati si dividono in medaglie di prima grandezza, o di bronzo, di seconda grandezza, o di bronzo mezzano, e di terza grandezza, o di picciol bronzo. Quelle di prima grandezza fabbricate a Roma sono per lo più di bronzo giallo, e più raro è trovarne in bronzo misto; di quelle all'incontro di mezzana, e di terza grandezza se ne trovano nell'un bronzo, e nell'altro. La grossezza, e il rilievo della testa molto si considera nella disposizione di queste classi. [...] L'arbitrio, e l'inclinazione dell'antiquario in sì fatte cose ha molto luogo: né alcuno perciò gli moverà lite". The first edition of this monograph was published in 1772. Eckhel (above n. 13), 151: the author describes the bronze coins of Didia Clara with the expression "Aenei I., II., III. formae"; Scotti (above n. 13), 8: the scale is explained briefly in the introduction ("I. II. III. IV. Forma").

¹⁷ Francesco Antonio Zaccaria (born in Venice in 1714, died in Rome in 1795), scholar of the Jesuit order, devoted himself to preaching. He became librarian in Modena in 1745, where he replaced Ludovico Antonio Muratori (1672–1750). L. Ferrari, *Onomasticon. Repertorio biobibliografico degli scrittori italiani dal 1501 al 1850*, Milano 1947, 699; E. R. Caley, *Metrological Tables*, New York 1965.

¹⁸ Zaccaria (above n. 13) 43; Eckhel (above n. 13) 151; Scotti (above n. 13) 8.

In particular, coins of Didia Clara were considered rare by scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Vaillant, as quoted by Schiavo, wrote that "eius nummi primi moduli inter raros sedem obtinent; secundi nondum ab antiquitatis inspecta sunt" (1692). Zaccaria classified bronze coins of Didia Clara as rare (R) (1793). Eckhel and Scotti evaluated them at the fourth level of rarity ("II forma, RRRR") (1828, 1838).¹⁹

Unfortunately, Schiavo does not mention expressly where he acquired his coin, as collectors sometimes did in their letters in this period.²⁰ However, we can make some hypotheses about the purchase, based on contemporary records. The Sicilian coin collectors of the eighteenth century could buy their coins at antiquarian markets, supplied by excavations at several Sicilian archaeological sites where strict supervision of governmental authorities did not yet exist. Moreover, jewellers also sold ancient silver and gold coins.²¹

Sometimes collectors and scholars conducted their own excavations to search for archaeological and numismatic finds. For example, Gabriele Lancillotto Castelli, Prince of Torremuzza, worked at *Halaesa Archonidea* (Santa Maria delle Palate, Tusa, Messina), where he would conduct surface research or purchase coins and archaeological finds directly from his farmers. In fact, it was after the young Castelli purchased a coin hoard at *Halaesa* that he started to collect and study ancient coins.²²

4. Conclusions

The analysis of Schiavo's letter contributes to a better knowledge of the activities of eighteenth-century Sicilian antiquarians and coin collectors. At this point, it is necessary to review the contents of Schiavo's letter, in order to understand his

¹⁹ Vaillant (above n. 10) 108; Zaccaria (above n. 13) 321; Eckhel (above n. 13) 151; Scotti (above n. 13) 275.

²⁰ Crisà 2011 (above n. 2): since Girolamo Chiaramonte Bonanno did not indicate where he purchased his coin of Constantine IV, we can infer that "il reperimento della moneta [...] potrebbe essere avvenuto tramite una scoperta archeologica, un acquisto, oppure uno scambio con un altro collezionista".

²¹ Equizzi (above n. 2) 249–51: letter of Di Blasi to G. Rotolo Aragona, 3 February 1798 (a jeweller was selling some coins, which a thief had stolen from Tommaso Gandolfo); Crisà 2009 (above n. 2) 121.

²² Crisà 2009 (above n. 2) 120–1.

research method. First of all, the author recalls the purchase of the coin, which he has purchased for his collection ("il mio Medagliere à fatto un grande, e singolare acquisto"). Schiavo has chosen a well-preserved coin ("di perfettiss.^{ima} conservazione"), probably according to aesthetic standards.

Next, Schiavo examines the coin and he describes its obverse and reverse. This process is supported by his reading of Vaillant's monograph, which is useful for the correct identification of the coin. Schiavo confirms the coin's value and its antiquity ("questa mia medaglia, che è d'indubitata antichità"), and he realises he has come to own a coin of the daughter of Didius Julianus, according to Vaillant's catalogue. This is a most significant novelty for the unknown addressee of this letter, and Schiavo encourages him to communicate the discovery to other numismatists.

Finally, the destiny of Schiavo's coin is unknown. He certainly kept it in his collection ("il mio Medagliere") for a while after its purchase. After all, very little is known of Schiavo's collection, due to the lack of archival records. It is possible that the coin of Didia Clara was lost after his death.

5. Letter of Michele Schiavo²³

[1r] Amico Cariss(i)^{mo}

Catania

Essendo continuamente da Voi pressato a Comunicarvi qualche cosa di nuovo, che di utile, e diletto, essere possa al mondo letterario, inserendola nelle v(ost)re Memorie, per secondare il v(ost)ro genio, vi dico, che in questi giorni il mio Medagliere à fatto un grande, e singolare acquisto, che così mi giova chiamare la medaglia di seconda grandezza di Didia Clara, non ancora dagli Antiquarj osservata. Ella è di perfettiss.^{ima} conservazione nel diritto, in cui mostra la testa di tal Principessa con attorno la legenda DIDIA CLARA AVG. e da quelle di prima grandezza si differisce alquanto nell'acconciatura de' capelli; Nel rovescio o poi, come nelle grandi, si osserva una donna con ramo di palma nella destra, e col corno dell'abbondanza nella sinistra, e vi si leggono intorno le lettere HILA...E... P... Quantun-[1v]que il rimanente sia corroso, da queste lettere bastantemente comprendesi, doversi leggere, come nelle altre Hilaritas Temporum.

²³ This transcription respects the original text. These words are underlined in the manuscript: "Memorie"; "Hilaritas temporum"; "Numismata Imperatorum prestantiora f. 108" (see above n. 10); "eius nummi primi moduli inter raros sedem obtinent"; "secundi nondum ab antiquitatis inspecta sunt"; "Nummografi".

Questa mia medaglia, che è d'indubitata antichità, à seco tratto le meraviglie di quanto intendenti di tali studj l'anno osservato. Lo stesso Giovanni Vaillant in queste materie così eccellente, nel suo libro Numismata Imperatorum prestantiora f(oglio) 104. Fa sapere scrivendo della rarità delle medaglie di Didia Clara: eius nummi primi moduli inter raros sedem obtinent; secundi nondum ab antiquitatis inspecta sunt.

Credo, che sommo piacere proverete nell'essere il primo a comunicare questa notizia agli eruditi Nummografi, e credo ancora, che in risposta a questa mia mi assicurerete del v(ost)ro gradimento, siccome io vi assicuro, che sono, e sarò sempre. V(ost)ro.

University of Milan