

# *Nulli tam laeti triumphi* - Constantine's victory on a reworked cameo in Leiden

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## Abstract

The iconography and date of the large imperial cameo, which was added recently to the collection of the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden, have intrigued scholars in the course of the last two centuries. The interpretation of the scene varied from the victory of emperor Claudius over the Britons in AD 43 to the festivities of emperor Constantine on the occasion of the Vicennalia in AD 325-326. In this article an overview of the most important theories will be given. Where possible, the scene on the cameo will be linked with the known facts about Constantine's career. It will be argued that the cameo was a senatorial gift to Constantine during the festivities of AD 315-316, the Decennalia, and depicts his victory over Maxentius in AD 312. Chronological incongruities and objections by earlier scholars are explained by a closer look at the hairstyles and headgears, which suggest a reworking of the cameo in AD 324.

## INTRODUCTION

In the year 2013 the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden acquired some 3500 Greek and Roman gems and cameos from the collection of the former Geld Museum (Money Museum) in Utrecht. The carved stones were originally part of the Royal Coin Cabinet in The Hague, which was founded in 1816. One of the most important pieces in this collection is the large imperial cameo, formerly known as the *Haagsche Camee* (The Hague Cameo) or *Grote Camee* (Grand Cameo). These old honorary names refer to its former residence in The Hague, and to its imposing size.<sup>1</sup> The rather turbulent history of the object in the hands of its previous owners (amongst whom Peter-Paul Rubens) has been diligently researched and published by A.N. Zadoks-Josephus Jitta and will not be discussed here.<sup>2</sup> In the course of time different interpretations of the scene depicted on the cameo have been given, as well as various identifications of the principal persons. Before we turn our attention to these interpretations, let us first examine the scenes on the cameo and the approximate date of the piece.

## DESCRIPTION

The cameo is cut from a three-layered white-blue agate measuring 21.1 cm (height) x 29.7 cm (width), with a thickness of ca 1.15-1.75 cm (*fig. 1*). The size of the cameo can be compared with the 1<sup>st</sup> century's *Gemma Augustea* in the *Kunsthistorisches*

*Museum* in Vienna and the *Grand Camée de France* in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris.<sup>3</sup> The surface of the stone is wavy as it follows the coloured layers, contrasting the figures in white against the background in milky blue. The stone is framed in a 17<sup>th</sup> century gilded brass case, adorned with enamel, polished rubies, agates and diamonds.<sup>4</sup> There are minor cracks in the surface of the stone, but no breaks. The scene shows a chariot, drawn by two prancing centaurs. On the chariot four persons are depicted: a man with a laurel wreath, holding a stylized thunderbolt, and embracing, with his left arm, a woman. The woman wears a wreath or diadem. Her head is covered with a veil. In her left hand she is holding a corn-ear and a poppy head. She is pointing with her index finger towards a young boy. Behind the man a second woman is depicted, wearing a laurel wreath. With her right hand she is also pointing at the boy in front of the couple. The boy is dressed in military gear and reaches with his right hand behind his back to produce an arrow from a quiver. With his left hand he touches the scabbard of his sword. A helmet with plume covers his head.

The two prancing centaurs form a lively composition. They are supporting an upturned shield on which a *tropaeum* is visible, consisting of a scaled cuirass and a scabbard hanging from a belt. The right centaur is upholding the pole on which the *tropaeum* is draped. Under his hooves two figures are visible. The person on the left wears a Roman tunic and is crouching, holding the leg of his partner and looking in fear at the



Fig. 1. The Leiden Cameo, with 17<sup>th</sup> century gilded casing (photo National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden).

centaur above him. The other man is wearing a military outfit and tries to support himself on his shield. His downward gaze shows he is succumbing, only moments away from death. Under the hooves of the left centaur a fallen calyx crater is visible, lying between the eight-spoked wheels of the chariot. Above the centaurs a winged Victoria in a long garment is flying towards the group in the chariot. In her outstretched hands she holds a crown, from which a very long double ribbon is spiralling. The ribbon makes a few twists, then disappears behind the *tropaeum* and reemerges above the head of the right centaur, where it ends in straight lines. The whole composition is a combination of dignity, even restraint (the group in the chariot) and of liveliness and movement (the centaurs and Victoria). The movement is enhanced by details such as the fluttering ribbon and the knocked-over crater.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, the serene composition of the group in the chariot reminds us of Julio-Claudian examples of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. The laurel wreath and the thunderbolt have imperial connotations,

so we may speak of an emperor and his wife, in the presence of a second woman and a boy, probably the heir to the throne. The emperor and empress are represented in the *capita opposita* scheme, which became popular in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.<sup>6</sup> The haircut of the emperor is reminiscent of the Julio-Claudian era.<sup>7</sup> The earliest publications of the cameo therefore suggested a date in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, but stylistically this is not possible. As F.L. Bastet has pointed out in his 1968 article, there are too many 4<sup>th</sup> century elements in the composition. For example, the paratactic placement of the chariot's wheels is awkward and the shaft connects the chariot with only one of the centaurs. Bastet mentions the reliefs on the sarcophagus of Helena in the Vatican as a parallel for the cameo. On this monument, the galloping horses have the same 'floating' attitude as the centaurs (fig. 2). The paratactical way in which parts of the chariot are connected with each other finds parallels in the chariot-scenes on the mosaics of the 4<sup>th</sup> century villa in Piazza Armerina (fig. 3).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore the 'swimming' attitude of the Vic-



Fig. 2. Sarcophagus of Helena, ca AD 330, Vatican Museums (photo Musei Vaticani).



Fig. 3. Circus Maximus mosaic (detail with chariots), Piazza Armerina, ca AD 440-460 (photo Museo Regionale della Villa Romana del Casale, Piazza Armerina).



Fig. 4. Victoria on the Arch of Constantine, Rome, AD 312-315  
(photo Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma).

toria can be compared with the 4<sup>th</sup> century Victoriae on the Arch of Constantine in Rome (fig. 4). The gaze of the emperor with the pupil high in the eye is furthermore reminiscent of portraits of Constantine the Great.<sup>9</sup>

#### THE CHARIOT

If we identify the emperor with Constantine, then the identification of the other figures is to a certain degree possible. After his relation with a certain Minervina Constantine was married to Fausta Flavia Maxima (AD 289-326), daughter of emperor Maximianus. The marriage took place in AD 307, after Constantine's elevation to the rank of *Augustus*. Fausta wears a wreath or diadem, is depicted *capite velato* and is holding a corn-ear and a poppy head in her left hand, alluding to Ceres' gifts of nature. Her appearance finds a parallel in a cameo in Rome (fig. 5).<sup>10</sup> On this cameo Livia is depicted in a *capita opposita* scheme with (probably) Augustus. Her head is ornated with a wreath consisting of corn-ears, leaves of olive and laurel, and cap-

sules of poppy: the *corona spicea*, the attribute of Ceres as bringer of prosperity, fertility and peace. The veil gives her the solemn attitude of a priestess. Fausta is also depicted with an corn-ear and a poppy head in her hand, which make an identification of the headgear as (originally) a cereal wreath a possibility.

The little boy, to whom both women are pointing, must be Crispus (ca AD 305-326), Constantine's son from his earlier engagement with Minervina.<sup>11</sup> As a little Mars he is wearing military gear. His posture, especially the backward reaching arm, is strongly reminiscent of the young princeps Gaius on the *Grand Camée de France* (fig. 6). The second woman in the chariot has a hairstyle with a bun in the neck and a ringlet. These traits have reminiscences of the elder Livia and especially of Agrippina Maior (fig. 7).<sup>12</sup> She might be identified with Constantine's mother Helena.<sup>13</sup> If this is the case, there are some problems of chronology, to which we will come back later. All in all, the chariot group glorifies the imperial family, comparing the emperor with Jupiter, his wife with Ceres and



Fig. 5. Cameo with a representation of a veiled Livia, wearing the corona spicea (cereal wreath), Rome, Medagliere Musei Capitolini (photo Archivio Fotografico dei Musei Capitolini).



Fig. 7. Sestertius with representation of Agrippina Maior, Rome, AD 37-41 (photo Nationale Numismatische Collectie, De Nederlandsche Bank, inv.1970-0169).



Fig. 6. 'Grand Camée de France', ca AD 20, Cabinet des Médailles, Paris (photo Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris).

the young heir to the throne with Mars. The formal, elevated style and the hairdos allude to the reign of Augustus, which brought the peace and prosperity of the *aurea aetas*, mentioned by poets like Vergil and Horace. If we identify the second woman with Helena, then we have three generations, together in triumph. The new dynastic rule is emphasized, which was an important issue at the time, as we read in the eulogy on Maximianus and Constantine of AD 307. It was the year of Constantine's marriage to Fausta:<sup>14</sup>

*'Maximas itaque vobis, aeterni principes, publico nomine gratias agimus, quod suscipiendis liberis optandisque nepotibus seriem vestri generis prorogando omnibus in futurum saeculis providetis ut Romana res [...] tandem perpetuis domus vestrae radicibus convalescat, tamque sit immortale illius imperium quam sempiterna suboles imperatorum.'*

'Thus we bring you, eternal emperors, the greatest praise in the name of the people, because by having children and by hoping for grandchildren, by prolonging the line of your dynasty, you are concerned that the Roman state will finally gain in strength through the continuous roots of your family and that her immortal power is as perpetual as the offspring of the emperors.'

#### CENTAURS, SOLDIERS AND BARBARIANS

Regarding the centaurs we are again reminded of the *Grand Camée de France*, in that the wild hairstyle and beards are very similar to those of the defeated barbarians sitting in the left corner of this cameo (fig. 6). The centaurs are connected with the cult of Bacchus. In this victorious setting one is reminded of Bacchus' triumph from India to the west. A connection between Constantine and Bacchus is to be found in another eulogy, written in Trier in AD 310 to celebrate Constantine's *Quinquennialia*. Triumphant gods come from far places, is the general idea of the following passage. We find Bacchus (and Ceres) in Britannia, the land where Constantine was first acclaimed as emperor:<sup>15</sup>

*'O fortunata et nunc omnibus beatior terra Britannia, quae Constantinum Caesarem prima vidisti! Merito te omnibus caeli ac soli bonis natura donavit, in qua nec rigor est nimius hiemis nec ardor aestatis, in qua segetum tanta fecunditas, ut muneribus utrisque sufficiat et Cereris et Liberi. [...] Di boni, quid hoc est quod semper ex aliquo supremo fine mundi nova deum numina universo*

*orbi colenda descendunt? Sic Mercurius a Nilo, cuius fluminis origo nescitur, sic Liber ab Indis prope conscis solis orientis deos se gentibus ostendere praesentes. Sacratoria sunt profecto mediterraneis loca vicina caelo, et inde propius a dis mittitur imperator ubi terra finitur.'*

'Oh lucky Britain, more blessed than any other country, you who first saw Constantine as emperor! Nature has rightly given you all things good from heaven and earth, where there is not too much cold in winter, and not too much heat in summer. Here is so much fertility of the crops, that it is sufficient for the good gifts of both Ceres and Liber. [...] Good gods, what is the secret that a new majesty of the gods always emerges from one or the other corner of the world, to be venerated by the whole universe? Thus Mercurius came from the Nile, a river whose origin is still unknown, and Liber came from India, a place that almost witnesses the rising of the sun, and both have shown themselves to the countries as truly present gods. Places near to the heaven are certainly more sacred than those in the middle, and it is therefore fitting that the gods send an emperor from where the earth ends.'

The two fallen enemies beneath the centaurs' hooves need a closer look (fig. 8). The left one wears only a tunic. Maybe his shield and armour have been used to dress up the *tropaeum*, which is carried by the right centaur. The other crouching figure leans on a shield and wears a cuirass. The tunic and the



Fig. 8. Leiden Cameo (detail): defeated enemies (photo National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden).

cuirass identify the enemies as Romans, but the long hair, covering their ears, places them in the realm of the barbarians.<sup>16</sup> On the cameo Roman soldiers and barbarians are merged.<sup>17</sup> In texts of the period a comparison is made between the 'soft' eastern and the 'tough' western enemies of Constantine. In the west he waged war against barbarians and Romans alike:<sup>18</sup>

*'Facile est vincere timidos et imbelles, quales amoena Graeciae et deliciae Orientis educunt, vix leve pallium et sericos sinos vitando sole tolerantantes et, si quando in periculum venerint, libertatis immemores, ut servire liceat orantes. Romanum vero militem, quem qualemque ordinat disciplina et sacramenti religio confirmat, aut truce[m] Francum ferina sola carne distentum, qui vitam pro victus sui vilitate contemnat, quantae molis sit superare vel capere! Quod tu, Imperator, et nuper in Italia et in ipso conspectu barbariae paulo ante fecisti!'*

'It is easy to beat fearsome and cowardly enemies, such as sweet Greece and the lovely Orient create, those who must wear the flimsy *pallium* and silken draperies to avoid the sunshine, those who suddenly forget everything about freedom once they are in danger, begging to be led in slavery. But take the real Roman soldier, who is ordered by discipline and confirmed by his solemn oath, or the gruesome Frank, filled with meat from wild animals, whose life is as unimportant for him as the vile food he eats, what a burden it is to be the victor or conqueror of them! And you, emperor, have done just that, recently in Italy and before that in the barbarian lands, eye to eye with the enemy!'

#### CONSTANTINE AND HIS VICTORIES

Before we turn our attention to earlier interpretations of the cameo, a closer look at some details of Constantine's rise to power can be helpful. During the first decade of his rule he managed to combine a skilful diplomatic attitude with a ruthless way of dealing with his adversaries. After the death of his father Constantius in York in AD 306, he was hailed as *Augustus* by the troops who had served under his father during the campaign in Northern England. The senior *Augustus* Galerius did not comply with this sudden rise to power, and demoted him to the rank of *Caesar*, giving the rank of *Augustus* to Flavius Valerius Severus. Constantine settled himself for the time being as *Caesar* in the imperial palace in Trier. Maxentius, son

of the former *Augustus* Maximianus, proclaimed himself *Augustus*, and took hold of Italy and North Africa. Maximianus joined forces with his son and together they managed to slay the forces of the rightful *Augustus* Valerius Severus. Galerius came to Severus' rescue, marched west and tried to take Rome, but to no avail. Maximianus later fell out with his son and went to Trier, to join the camp of Constantine, whom he raised to the rank of *Augustus*. When Maximianus committed treason hostilities broke out between Constantine and his father-in-law. Maximianus was captured in Marseille and executed by Constantine in AD 310; the scales of power in the west were divided between Constantine and Maxentius.

In AD 312 Constantine attacked the Italian territories of Maxentius with astonishing speed. In a series of battles and sieges the towns of Susa, Turin, Brescia and Verona fell one by one. The rest of the Italian cities surrendered, until Constantine, in October AD 312, found himself in front of the walls of Rome. Maxentius left the safety of the city and opposed Constantine near the Milvian bridge, north of Rome. It is said that on his way to Rome Constantine had a vision, seeing the Christian *chi-rho* symbol in the sky with the words 'In this sign you shall conquer'. The vision was followed by a dream, in which Christ admonished him to use the sign during the impending battle.<sup>19</sup> On 28 October he won a decisive victory over Maxentius, his troops sporting the Christian symbol on their shields. Maxentius drowned in the Tiber. Constantine entered the city with his triumphant soldiers and was hailed as liberator and restorer of peace. During the march Maxentius' head was carried around on a spear and ridiculed by the people of Rome. Everybody wanted to see the new emperor, and when Constantine finally ascended the Palatine to enter the palace there were shouts that they had not seen enough of him yet:<sup>20</sup>

*'Ausi etiam quidam ut resisteres poscere et queritam cito accessisse palatium et, cum ingressus esses, non solum oculis sequi sed paene etiam sacrum limen inrumpere.'*

'Some people even dared to demand you to stop and to complain that you went so fast to the palace, and once you were inside, they dared to follow you not only with their eyes but nearly invaded the sacred area.'

Even some ten years later, in AD 321, the memory of this glorious *adventus* was still fresh in the memory of the orator Nazarius:<sup>21</sup>

*'Nullus post Urbem conditam dies Romano inluxit imperio, cuius tam effusa tamque insignis gratulatio aut fuerit aut esse debuerit. Nulli tam laeti triumphi, quos annalium vetustas consecratos in litteris habet.'*

'There was no day after the founding of Rome, illuminating the Roman Empire, of which the eulogy has been, or should have been so outspoken and so extraordinary. There are no triumphs so happy, which the antiquity of the annals keeps immortalized in writing.'

It was Constantine's first visit to the legendary city, which had given its name to the empire, but was already for decades overshadowed by the four new capitals, which were created during the tetrarchy.<sup>22</sup> Constantine managed to gain the confidence of the senate, especially by means of diplomacy and by sparing most of the former supporters of Maxentius. Constantine, now the sole *Augustus* in the western half of the empire, stayed a short time in Rome, during which he erased all memories of Maxentius, and managed to restore the food supply.<sup>23</sup> After two months he left Rome, with the promise to return in AD 315 for the celebration of the *Decennalia*, his first ten years in power.<sup>24</sup> Preparing for this event, the senate of Rome undertook various enterprises to honour the new emperor, in public and more private spheres. The most influential man in Rome at the time was a certain Gaius Ceionius Rufius Volusianus, *praefectus urbi* between AD 313 and AD 315 and consul in AD 314.<sup>25</sup> He placed a statue of Constantine on the *Forum Traiani*, with an inscription, which is very similar to that of the arch of Constantine.<sup>26</sup> Volusianus is a likely candidate to be the senator in charge of the festivities of the *Decennalia* and the honours bestowed on the emperor.

The Arch of Constantine was dedicated in 315 by the Senate and People of Rome to hail the 'restorer of peace' and the 'saviour of the city'. The main inscription states that Constantine's triumph was caused by 'the inspiration of divinity and the greatness of mind' (*instinctu divinitatis mentis magnitudine*). The inscription is ingenious in its linguistic duality, befitting a senate which is honouring its new emperor but wondering at his intentions with the Christian symbolism.<sup>27</sup> A second monument was put up in the new basilica on the *Forum Romanum*, built by Maxentius and completed after his death in AD 312. This *Basilica Nova* was mainly used by the senate as a tribunal, with an apse designed for the official sittings and hearings.<sup>28</sup> Between AD 312 and AD 315 the *Basilica* was stripped of its Maxentian connotations and

dedicated to Constantine's merits. A new apse was constructed in the northern wall of the building to house the tribunal. In the vacated western apse a colossal statue of Constantine was erected, demi-nude, sitting, holding a sceptre and globe in his hands. Recent reconstructions state that the statue represented Constantine as Jupiter.<sup>29</sup> The statue had been constructed as an acrolith: the body parts were made of marble, the garments of metal. Constantine's face has reminiscences of the Julio-Claudian emperors: clean shaven and hair in curls around the forehead: a clear break with the grim, austere military portraits of the tetrarchs.<sup>30</sup>

According to Zadoks-Josephus Jitta, during the *Decennalia* a third, more personal gift was offered by the senate to the emperor: a large cameo with the triumphant imperial family in a chariot, carved in 1<sup>st</sup> century style, reminiscent of the *aurea aetas* and the *Saturni regna* which began with Augustus.<sup>31</sup> Zadoks-Josephus Jitta's hypothesis is attractive: the cameo combines the triumph over the troops of Maxentius, symbolized by the 'barbaric' Roman soldiers lying on the ground, with the new era of Constantine after the decade of war. Augustus had ended the civil wars of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, and Constantine had done the same with his victory over Maxentius. With these thoughts in mind, let us now turn to some of the alternative theories concerning the date and interpretation of the cameo.

#### TRIUMPH AND DEFEAT

I think that all attempts to date the cameo in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD can be left aside.<sup>32</sup> The cameo certainly attempts to reproduce the first century atmosphere in the portraits of the imperial family and the 'citations' from other 1<sup>st</sup> century cameos, but the 4<sup>th</sup> century stylistic elements speak clearly for a 'revival' of the Augustan style, rather than for a less well succeeded product of the 1<sup>st</sup> century itself. If we assume that on the Palatine a treasure gallery was present, then it is likely that the cutter used elements from the earlier gemstones for his inspiration. This might explain the likeness between 'Crispus' and 'Gaius' and between the 'Centaur' and the 'Barbarians' on the *Grand Camée de France*. The Livia-Ceres cameo in Rome, mentioned earlier, could have been the model for Fausta-Ceres on our stone.

The allegation made by Möbius that the cameo is a 17<sup>th</sup> century fake deserves attention.<sup>33</sup> The fact that the emperor is sitting in his chariot (and not standing as a *triumphator*) does not need to disturb us. In AD 312 Constantine entered the



city sitting in a carriage, emphasizing that he was celebrating an *adventus*, and not a formal *triumphus* over a foreign enemy.<sup>34</sup> On the cameo the chariot and the fallen soldiers are triumphal elements, but the sitting emperor places the iconography in line with the *adventus* decoration on the Arch of Constantine.

Möbius is right in seeing parallels between the Leiden cameo and the *Grand Camée de France*, but as is said above, the 'copying' of parts of the stone could well have been done in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. With the feeling in 4<sup>th</sup> century Rome of a new 'Augustan' age, the technique of cutting grand imperial cameos was reintroduced, and took its inspiration from the examples of the past. If (as I believe) Fausta is carved after the Livia-Ceres cameo in Rome, then the whole allegation of a forgery crumbles, as the Livia-Ceres cameo was only discovered in 1874.<sup>35</sup> Möbius' observation that the emperor does not look like Constantine is only partly true. He looks like Augustus, but the position of the pupil high in the eye identifies him as Constantine. The most compelling argument against a 17<sup>th</sup> century fake lies outside these observations. The quality of 17<sup>th</sup> century imitations and forgeries of ancient gems and cameos is well-known. With utmost dexterity new creations 'à l'antique' were made and were esteemed as 'catching the true antique spirit.'<sup>36</sup> If a 17<sup>th</sup> century educated forger with enough finances would have liked to add a third to the two already known great cameos, with a very precious agate of extreme size in his hands, would he not have chosen a very able stone cutter, who could work in the desired style? And would the design of the cameo not be more in line with the already known examples, without the confusing mixture of 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century elements?

G. Bruns<sup>37</sup> dates the cameo in the year AD 324 after Constantine's victory over Licinius. The little boy would be Constantinus II, the eldest son of Fausta. On the occasion of Licinius' defeat both Fausta and Helena were raised to the rank of *Augusta*. This might explain the laurel wreath in the hair of Helena, but poses more problems than solutions. The overall pagan iconography of the cameo is plausible as a gift from the senate to the emperor in AD 315, but if we are to believe Eusebius, even as early as AD 315 Constantine objected to his being portrayed as Jupiter in the *Basilica Nova* on the Forum. He replaced Jupiter's sceptre by a cross, and added an inscription, in which he stated that

'By this salutary sign, the true proof of bravery, I have saved and freed your city from the yoke

of the tyrant and moreover, having set at liberty both the senate and the people of Rome, I have restored them to their ancient distinction and splendor.'<sup>38</sup>

In a way this inscription elaborates on the *instinctu divinitatis* on the arch. It repeats the elements of 'freedom' and 'tyranny', but links the victory and bravery directly with the 'salutary sign' of the cross. It is unlikely that the text is part of Eusebius' Christian propaganda, because the cited inscription refers to a real statue, which stood in the *Basilica Nova* and was visible for everyone.<sup>39</sup> If there would be no cross and no inscription in sight, Eusebius' text would have undermined all his other eulogies on Constantine.<sup>40</sup>

It is not very likely that ten years later, in AD 324, anybody would have thought of depicting Constantine as Jupiter. In AD 324 Constantine had three sons by Fausta. Would it have been likely that he depicted Constantinus II as his sole heir, with Crispus in full vigour, successful admiral of the fleet and adorned with the title *Caesar*?

Finally we will look at Bastet's suggestion that the cameo has to be dated in the year AD 310, after Constantine's victory over his father-in-law Maximianus.<sup>41</sup> Was this a real victory? We could say that a battle was won, but that the war was not over, with Maxentius in full power over Italy and Africa. If we date the stone to AD 310, he must have been carved in Trier with incredible speed, by a carver who had no access to the imperial cameos in Rome. Where would he have seen the Julio-Claudian examples, with their specific hairstyles? The most important argument against the earlier date is that the capture and forced suicide of Maximianus in Marseille had more aspects of a tragedy than of a victory. Constantine's father had served as *Caesar* under Maximianus, and had married his daughter Theodora. Constantine had been promoted to the rank of *Augustus* by Maximianus and had married another daughter, Fausta. The treason of Maximianus in AD 310 was a black page in the history of the family, and in the words of the panegyrist not one worthy to be celebrated 'with too many details'. Maximianus' treason was seen as a pitiful misjudgement of an old, once powerful man.<sup>42</sup>

#### LECTIO DIFFICILIOR POTIOR?

All earlier 'lectures' of the cameo present difficulties. The date suggested by Zadoks-Josephus Jitta, AD 315, is attractive, if we look at the imperial cameo as one of the gifts from the senate to its

new emperor. Between AD 312 and AD 315 there was time in Rome to build the arch, time to erect the colossal statue, and time to think about the appropriate message the senate would convey to Constantine: the return to the *aurea aetas*, to the reign of Saturnus, with an emperor, powerful as Jupiter, wise as Augustus, with a young wife and an heir to the throne. If we identify the woman behind Constantine with Helena, there remains a problem. The fact that she is pointing at Crispus suggests a position of equality to the emperor's wife, who is making the same gesture.<sup>43</sup> An identification with already deceased empresses (Augustus' wife Livia,<sup>44</sup> or Constantine's presumed grandmother Claudia<sup>45</sup>) seems to me the *lectio difficilior* of the picture. Helena, Constantine's mother who took care of Crispus' education, seems to be the best candidate. She was present at the court around the time her son became *Augustus* in the west. Her 'Livia-Agrippina Maior hairstyle' places her in line with prominent and influential ladies at the court of Augustus. But what about the laurel wreath, to which she was entitled only after AD 324? To answer this question, let us first examine the wreaths of both Constantine and the presumed Helena in more detail (fig. 9). Constantine's wreath is carved with much accuracy. The leaves unfold themselves regularly and blend in with the hair. At the nape of the neck the wreath is bound together by a double ribbon, which falls down on the right shoulder. If

we compare this wreath with the headgear of Helena, there are certain differences. The wreath on Helena's head has been cut straight into the hairs, with no 'unfolding' leaves as in the emperor's wreath. A ribbon, to tie the wreath on the backside of the head, is missing. It seems strange that two imperial wreaths are cut with such differences.

If we compare the modelling of the hair with the other figures on the cameo, then another observation can be made. While all the figures, from the solemn emperor to the excited centaurs, have an elaborate haircut, with curls, locks or twirls, Helena has to be content with only five parallel cuts on the upper side of her head, and some indentations below the wreath. Also the volume of her head seems to be incongruous with the persons surrounding her, making her look smaller and therefore younger. Her fine profile does not match the unrefined hairdo. If we try to seek an explanation for these internal anomalies, we might reach a conclusion on the identity of the imperial lady in the chariot and the date of the cameo.

As it is widely known, the reuse and reworking of portraits, reliefs and statues during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century AD was common practice.<sup>46</sup> The reliefs on the Arch of Constantine are for the most part reused from earlier monuments of the emperors Trajan, Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius. If this was due to scarcity of time to complete the monument, the lack of competent artists or the



Fig. 9. Leiden Cameo (detail): Constantine and Helena (photo National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden).

desire to compare the new emperor with illuminating predecessors, is still a matter of opinion.<sup>47</sup> The fact is, that on the arch the portraits of the original emperors are reworked, in order to portray and honour the *Augusti* Constantius, Constantine and maybe Licinius. The head of the colossal statue in the *Basilica Nova* might have been reworked after AD 325-326 in order to add the *diadema* around the head, the new official headgear of Constantine.<sup>48</sup> In my opinion a comparable action took place on our cameo in AD 324, to congratulate the *Augustae* with their new rank. The cameo could have been reworked in the wake of the *Vicennalia* of AD 325-326, with the imperial family approaching Italy.

In my view the cameo in its original form was a present from the senate to the imperial family in the year AD 315, designed in its mythological complexity and Augustan allegory by the *praefectus urbi* Volusianus.<sup>49</sup> The three generations in the chariot are a symbol of the continuity of Rome's power, as celebrated on earlier dynastic cameos from the Julio-Claudian era. The cameo is thus a strong statement that good times have arrived and that all the new 'members of court' stand in the tradition of a grand age. The original agate will have shown Helena as the epitome of a loyal wife, mother and grandmother, by giving her the hairdo of Augustus' wife Livia and Germanicus' spouse Agrippina Maior.

The cameo, with its pagan iconography, will have raised imperial eyebrows, but it could only be seen in the private sphere of the palace and was of no influence on Constantine's public image: for the time being it remained as it was. In AD 324 Constantine reached new heights of power. With the fleet under the command of Crispus he defeated the eastern *Augustus* Licinius and became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. As mentioned earlier his mother Helena and his wife Fausta were elevated to the rank of *Augustae*. From this year on, they appear on coins with the new title and wearing a wreath or diadem (*fig. 10*).<sup>50</sup> It is my hypothesis that the Leiden cameo was recut in view of the new iconography of the years after AD 324. The original hairdo of Helena was reworked in order to insert a somewhat mechanical laurel wreath. A considerable portion of the original coiffure had to be removed, to give the wreath the desired relief. This might explain the lack of volume on the backside of the head, and the weak lines, cuts and indentations, which, after the insertion of the wreath, took over the original waves of the Livia hairstyle. The headgear of Fausta also suggests reworking. If originally she



Fig. 10. *Follis* of Flavia Helena Augusta with diadem, Trier, AD 327-328 (photo Nationale Numismatische Collectie, De Nederlandsche Bank, inv. RO-10385a).

wore the *corona spicea*, in line with representations of empresses as Ceres, then it is likely that this wreath has been recut into a not too convincing diadem.

#### EPILOGUE: SUNT HAEC GEMMEA SED NERONIANA

The creation and early history of the Leiden cameo remain full of assumptions. One of these is the presence in Rome of a gallery, in which the imperial cameos were kept and seen by selected visitors. In Bastet's 1968 article a very interesting fragment is cited from a letter, written around AD 470, by Sidonius Apollinaris (ca AD 430-489). Sidonius was a bishop, diplomat and poet, living in the centre of France. In the letter Sidonius praises the poetic talent of his friend Secundinus, but reproaches him that he is withholding his 'genius and irony' out of respect for 'certain persons'. He writes that a certain Flavius Ablabius, who held the consulate in AD 331 and was a close acquaintance of Constantine, did not have any scruples, even towards the emperor:<sup>51</sup>

'What fine malice I found in [your poem]; what style, what pungent eloquence! it was impossible for me to keep my enthusiasm to myself. As for your subjects, you were fearless; only the necessity for respecting persons seemed to check somewhat the lightning of your genius and the free course of your irony. I think the Consul Ablabius never thrust more

brilliantly at the family life of Constantine with a couplet, or gave more stinging point to the famous distichon secretly appended to the palace gates:

*Saturni aurea saecla quis requirat?  
Sunt haec gemmea, sed Neroniana.*

You remember that, when this was written, Constantine had done to death his consort Fausta in a hot bath and his son Crispus with cold poison. I would not have you deterred by anything from your bold and vivid use of satire. You will find the flourishing vices of our tyrant-ridden citizens a rich mine to exploit.'

Ablabius was present in Rome during the *Vicennalia* of AD 325-326. The events mentioned in the letter are the executions of Crispus and Fausta, ordered by Constantine in AD 326, just before the end of the solemn festivities in Rome.<sup>52</sup> Facts and fiction surrounding the reasons for these deaths are difficult, if not impossible, to discern. Maybe the popularity of Crispus after his military achievements against Licinius in AD 324 became a source of concern for Fausta, in view of the dynastic possibilities of her own children.<sup>53</sup> She may have started rumours about Crispus' political aspirations, or may even have accused him of sexual harassment. Fact is that Constantine felt himself forced to put his son to death.<sup>54</sup> The execution of Crispus eventually cost Fausta her own life.<sup>55</sup> After the *Vicennalia* Rome was left in gloom. Helena left Italy on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and Constantine went east, to Constantinople. He never visited Rome again, not even to bury his mother in ca AD 330. The hopeful *aurea aetas* was over.

For the history of our cameo Ablabius' distichon is important. The two lines may be translated as:

'Who still wishes those golden ages of Saturn?  
They exist only on a gem, but this is very Neronian...'

The distichon refers to the 'golden age', as depicted on a carved stone. A stone, which recalled the Julio-Claudian dynasty, especially its last emperor Nero. A dynasty which began full of hope with Augustus, but ended with the tyranny and suicide of Nero. Constantine's early reign had started with prospects of a new era, and ended with the emperor putting to death his own son and wife. The Leiden cameo matches the atmosphere of the

consul's distichon strikingly. If our assumption of an art gallery in the palace of the emperor is true, then people like Ablabius must have seen the collection of imperial cameos, with all their political meanings. Ablabius understood the message of the cameo as a symbol of the rebirth of the glorious Augustan past. It inspired him to write two pungent lines, hinting at the end of dynastic promises. His distichon became so popular, that in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD it was still in circulation in France, cited by Roman intellectuals some 150 years after the dynastic tragedy in Italy.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Royal Coin Cabinet was founded by King Willem I in 1816, with the collection of coins, medals and carved stones of the House of Orange. The king bought the cameo in 1823 for 50.000 guilders and placed it in the Royal Coin Cabinet. The Cabinet was moved to Leiden in 1986, and merged with the collections of the Dutch National Bank and the Dutch National Mint in 2004 to form the Money Museum in Utrecht. The carved stones comprise Mesopotamian cylinder seals, Egyptian scarabs, Greek and Roman gems and cameos and engraved stones of later periods. See Groen-Van Andel 1986; for the Greek and Roman gems: Maaskant-Kleibrink 1978.
- <sup>2</sup> Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1951b. The cameo was owned by Peter-Paul Rubens in Antwerp. In 1629 it sailed on board of the VOC vessel *Batavia* to the Dutch Indies. The *Batavia* shipwrecked off the coast of Australia, but the cameo was salvaged. For more than 20 years attempts were made to sell the stone to local rulers in the East Indies, India, Persia and Thailand, but to no avail. The cameo returned to Amsterdam. Its last private owner was King Willem I.
- <sup>3</sup> The *Gemma Augustea* measures 23 cm x 19 cm. The dimensions of the *Grand Camée de France* are 31 cm x 26.5 cm.
- <sup>4</sup> The Flemish-Renaissance style of the frame points to the first known owner of the cameo: Peter-Paul Rubens in Antwerp.
- <sup>5</sup> A fallen vessel is often used in scenes with a suggestion of speed or violence. See for an early example the shoulder scene of an Attic black figure hydria, ca 510 BC, Munich, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, inv. 1722 (Achilles pursuing Troilus, [http://www.bc.edu/bc\\_org/avp/cas/ashp/NEWhp252/portnov/troilus.html](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/ashp/NEWhp252/portnov/troilus.html)).
- <sup>6</sup> See for example the cameo with Livia and Augustus (or Tiberius) in the Musei Capitolini in Rome (La Rocca et al. 2013, cat. nr IX.4, p. 320) and the *Gemma Claudia* in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (Inv. IX A, nr. 63).
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. Martin Henig's remarks on the cameo: 'The manner in which the dynasty has been placed in a mythological context deliberately recalls the cameos of the Augustan and Julio-Claudian period, but the unevenness of the gem and the much later style of the carving leave little doubt that this is a work of Constantinian date and can probably be placed around the time of his *decennalia* in 315.' (M. Henig in Hartley et al. 2006, 139).
- <sup>8</sup> Bastet 1968, 6. On the sarcophagus we find similar movement of the galloping horses, which trample enemies. See for this sarcophagus: Drijvers 1991, 74-76. See

- for the chariots of the Piazza Armerina villa complex: Dunbabin 1999, 133-135 and fig. 136.
- <sup>9</sup> Apart from the well-known colossal head in Rome, see for example Hartley et al., 2006, 141 (gold medallion, Nationale Numismatische Collectie, De Nederlandsche Bank, inv. AM 11094).
- <sup>10</sup> Rome, Musei Capitolini, Medagliere, inv. AC 12067. See Megow 1987, 255-256; Bartman 1999, 292, nr. 104; Sena Chiesa 2004, 793; La Rocca et al. 2013, cat. nr IX.4, p. 320. For the iconography of Livia as Ceres: La Rocca et al. 2013, 165, 205 (III.5).
- <sup>11</sup> Odahl 2004, 72-73.
- <sup>12</sup> Most recently on Livia's portraits: Jessen 2013, Figs. E 15, E 17, E 21 (posthumous portraits). See also Bartman 1999, fig. 6.
- <sup>13</sup> The fact that Helena is depicted smaller than Constantine and Fausta does not need to confuse us. The same difference in scale is apparent on the so-called Ada Cameo in Trier, dated AD 316: 'It is interesting to note that the heads of Constantine and Fausta are of equal stature, and rise above those of Helena and her two grandsons.' (Odahl 2004, 124). See also Hartley et al. 2006, 73.
- <sup>14</sup> *Incerti Panegyricus Maximiano et Constantino Dictus* (= *Panegyrici Latini* VII (6), II, 2, translation by author).
- <sup>15</sup> *Incerti Panegyricus Constantino Augusto Dictus* (= *Panegyrici Latini* VI (7), IX, 2-5, translation by author).
- <sup>16</sup> The Roman dress of the enemies has also been observed by Martin Henig in Hartley et al. 2006, 138-139. He mentions the 'clean-shaven' faces of the soldiers, but does not comment on their long hair. See for 'typical' barbarians: A. Chauvot, Roman representations of the Barbarians, in Aillagon 2004, 156-159; Y. Rivière, Sarcophagi with battle scenes, in Aillagon 2004, 166-169.
- <sup>17</sup> 'È ancora il panegirico più volte citato a insinuare che Massenzio non fosse figlio legittimo di Massimiano e che i suoi soldati "erano stati fino a poco prima romani", intendendo così che a causa dei loro crimini si erano trasformati in barbari contro cui combattere una guerra era non solo lecito ma addirittura giusto, come eventualmente celebrare un trionfo.' Tortorella 2013, 640. The cited panegyrist is: *Incerti Panegyricus Constantino Augusto Dictus* (= *Panegyrici Latini* XII (9), 5, 3).
- <sup>18</sup> *Incerti Panegyricus Constantino Augusto Dictus* (= *Panegyrici Latini* XII (9), 24, 1-2, translation by author).
- <sup>19</sup> Odahl 2004, 94-95.
- <sup>20</sup> *Incerti Panegyricus Constantino Augusto Dictus* (= *Panegyrici Latini* XII (9), 19, 3, translation by the author). Odahl (2004, 111) is wrong in reading this passage as pagan criticism on Constantine for not ascending the Capitol in order to sacrifice to Jupiter. Constantine's glorious arrival in Rome was not a formal triumph after the defeat of a foreign enemy (Demandt/Engemann 2007, 86). The complaint of some of the onlookers was that they wanted to see more of the liberator of their city.
- <sup>21</sup> *Panegyricus Nazarii Dictus Constantino Augusto* (*Panegyrici Latini* IV (10), 30, 4-5, translation by author).
- <sup>22</sup> 'In the new order the real centres of power were the places where the emperors and their courts resided; but Rome was still the official capital of the Roman Empire.' Odahl 2004, 69.
- <sup>23</sup> *Nam quidquid mali sexennio toto dominatio feralis inflixerat, bimestris fere cura sanavit.* 'All things that the lethal reign [of Maxentius] had done wrong during six whole years, were set right in about two months by [Constantine's] care.' (*Panegyricus Nazarii Dictus Constantino Augusto*, *Panegyrici Latini* V (10), 33, 6, translation by the author). See about the erasing of Maxentius' memory in Rome: Kähler 1953.
- <sup>24</sup> He had to leave Rome to meet emperor Licinius in Milan. In that city Licinius married Constantia, a half-sister of Constantine. Together they drew up the Edict of Milan, which ended the persecutions of Christians and granted them privileges. Odahl 2004, 116-117.
- <sup>25</sup> Ceionius Rufius Volusianus held the position of *Corrector Campaniae* and *Corrector Italiae* for eight years. He became *Proconsul Africae* and *Praefectus Praetorio* under Maxentius. In the latter position he defeated the usurper Domitius Alexander in Africa. He was promoted by Maxentius to *Praefectus Urbi* and held the consulate in AD 311. Constantine kept him in honour and appointed him *Praefectus Urbi* for the years 313-315 and consul in 314. He fell from grace and was exiled in 315 for unknown reasons, cf. this article, note 38. See Barnes 1975; *Der neue Pauly*, s.v. Ceionius [8], 1046-1047. See for his involvement in the building of the Arch of Constantine: Chenault 2008, 27-28, 113.
- <sup>26</sup> The inscription (now lost) honoured Constantine as 'The restorer of the human race, enlarger of the Roman empire and dominion, and founder of eternal security.' See Bardill 2012, 131.
- <sup>27</sup> The questions about the triumphal character of the arch and its ambiguous inscription are answered very strongly by Stefano Tortorella: 'L'arco si caratterizza indubitabilmente come un arco trionfale, quand'anche il trionfo non fosse stato celebrato. Il riferimento alla divinità (*instinctu divinitatis*) è sufficientemente vago per poter essere letto e interpretato sia in senso pagano che cristiano.' Tortorella 2013, 640.
- <sup>28</sup> Kähler 1953, 6-7. Odahl 2004, 111.
- <sup>29</sup> Demandt/Engemann 2007, 130: 'Der Kaiser ist nach hergebrachter heidnischer Tradition im Typus des stehenden Jupiters dargestellt.'
- <sup>30</sup> Demandt/Engemann 2007, 98.
- <sup>31</sup> Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1951a. Zadoks-Josephus Jitta does not see a specific triumph in the scene, but a general 'Victoria Perpetua'. She elaborated on her theory in later articles, see for example: Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1951b; 1966; 1967.
- <sup>32</sup> For example Furtwängler 1900, 304; Vollenweider 1964, 7. Vollenweider explains the anomalies on the cameo by assuming a return to an Italic-Etruscan style under Claudius: 'Dies sind alles Anzeigen für eine unter Claudius begünstigte Rückkehr zu alt-Italisches Etruskischem Stil und Kunst!'
- <sup>33</sup> Möbius 1948-49, 102; 1966, 91.
- <sup>34</sup> Odahl 2004, 142. Stefano Tortorella suggests that even a formal triumph might be celebrated sitting on a cathedra: Tortorella 2013, 640.
- <sup>35</sup> See La Rocca et al. 2013, 320.
- <sup>36</sup> See for example Willers/Raselli-Nydegger (eds.) 2003, 204-221. This sentiment lasted for a long time. Johann Heinrich Meyer wrote to Goethe in 1796: 'Das Gute und Schöne bleibt immer der wahre Prüfstein, und wenn diese ersten Bedingungen erfüllt sind, so fragen wir auch nicht weiter nach Alterthum oder Neuzeit.' (Ibidem, 62).
- <sup>37</sup> Bruns 1948, 8.
- <sup>38</sup> Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 9, 10-11. If Volusianus as *Praefectus Urbi* AD 313-315 and consul in AD 314 was responsible for these honours bestowed on Constantine, the 'pagan' connotations of the gifts could be one of the reasons for his fall from grace in AD 315: 'Beim Rombesuch Constantins 315 scheint C. in Ungnade

- gefallen und ins Exil geschickt worden zu sein.' (*Der neue Pauly*, s.v. Ceionius [8], 1047).
- <sup>39</sup> Cf. Kähler 1953, 29: 'Wenn die Stelle bei Euseb nicht überhaupt Erfindung ist, was anzunehmen um so weniger Veranlassung ist, als er ja, da es sich um eine Realie handelt, durch jeden seiner Leser ohne weiteres hätte Lügen gestraft werden können und seinem Werk mehr geschadet als genützt hätte (...).'
- <sup>40</sup> 'Nur die Inschrift scheint ihm [= Eusebius, RBH], dem Sammler und Gelehrten, wörtlich bekannt gewesen zu sein.' Kähler 1953, 28. Kähler follows Eusebius literally in assuming that Constantine ordered the cross and the inscription already before the statue was erected, and sees an incongruity between the mortal 'Christian' emperor and his depiction as a superhuman god (Kähler 1953, 29). As said before, Constantine was only two months in Rome in 312. In my view, after Constantine attended the more urgent matters of state, the full preparations for his *Decennalia* were put into motion by the senate after he left. When he returned in 315 and saw himself depicted as Jupiter, he took action, replaced the sceptre by the cross and deflected the pagan associations by honouring the cross in the inscription.
- <sup>41</sup> Bastet 1968.
- <sup>42</sup> The anonymous orator ascribes Maximianus' treason to an *error iam desipientis aetatis* ('an error due to his already debilitating age'). See *Incerti Panegyricus Constantino Augusto Dictus* (= *Panegyrici Latini* VI (7), IX, 15,2).
- <sup>43</sup> 'The fact that Helena was not only the grandmother, but also the surrogate mother of Constantine's son, may have elevated her position at court, and reminded Fausta of her failure so far to give her husband other children' (Odahl 2004, 124).
- <sup>44</sup> Bastet 1968 sees in the woman a reincarnation of Livia, giving approval to the new dynasty of Constantine.
- <sup>45</sup> Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1966 identifies her as Claudia, the grandmother of Constantine. She was the daughter of Crispus (Maior), who in turn was the brother of emperor Claudius II Gothicus. Hence the Claudian hairstyles.
- <sup>46</sup> See for example: J. Engemann, *Der Konstantinsbogen*, in Demandt/Engemann 2007, 85-90; N. Hannestad, *Die Porträtskulptur zur Zeit Konstantins des Grossen*, in Demandt/Engemann 2007, 96-117. Tortorella 2013, *passim*.
- <sup>47</sup> J. Engemann, *Der Konstantinsbogen*, in Demandt/Engemann 2007, 88-89.
- <sup>48</sup> See Kähler 1953, 24.
- <sup>49</sup> It can be compared with the message of the arch, which 'presented the pagan senatorial view of the first Christian emperor' (Odahl 2004, 141). Volusianus was well versed in religious matters: he held the priesthood as a *Quindecimvir Sacris Faciundis* and was one of the *Sep-temviri Epulonum*, see: Martindale/Jones 1971, 978.
- <sup>50</sup> See for a diademed draped bust of Fausta for example: RIC VII, 162, B; RIC VII, 162, G (AE, folles, from Thessalonica, 326-8).
- <sup>51</sup> Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistulae* 5.7 (translation by O.M. Dalton).
- <sup>52</sup> Odahl 2004, 204: 'Constantine undoubtedly wanted Crispus to join him for the festival to be staged in Rome celebrating the end of his Vicennalia and the beginning of his son's.'
- <sup>53</sup> Fausta gave birth to a daughter Constantina in AD 315 and to a son Constantinus II in 316. Constantius II followed in 317. The last son, Constans, was born in AD 320. Before 326 a second daughter Helena was born.

- <sup>54</sup> At the same time that Crispus fell out of grace Constantine was revising and introducing laws concerning sex, adultery and marriage. Abduction and rape were dealt with very severely. One of the theories concerning Crispus' execution presumes that he tried to rape his mother-in-law. This could have been staged by Fausta, who also produced 'witnesses'. See Odahl 2004, 204-205.
- <sup>55</sup> Odahl 2004, 206: 'Irrational fears, craving for power and maternal instincts thus induced Fausta to devise a plot to get rid of Crispus late in the spring of 326.' Crispus was forced to take poison. Fausta was locked inside the *sudatorium* of the palace's bath complex in Rome until she died.

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