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**A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY: JULIA DOMNA AS CONCORDIA ON RIC 380 AND 381**

**Abstract** – The reverse figures on two coin types of Julia Domna (RIC 380 and 381) have been identified as either the empress herself or a personification of Pax. This article offers a third possibility. By examining numismatic evidence pertaining to the empress in the context of the fraught period of Caracalla and Geta’s joint rule of the Empire, I will argue that the most likely identity of the personification depicted on RIC 380 and 381 is that of Concordia. This identification fits more comfortably with the rest of the numismatic corpus for the period, and also makes greater sense when considered in the midst of the intense rivalry observed between the young Augusti in months preceding Geta’s eventual murder.

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Of all of the Roman empresses and imperial consorts, Julia Domna stands out as one of the most famous and best studied in recent years. Much attention has been devoted to the subject of her life and many have attempted to assess her unusually prominent role within the Severan dynasty.\[{1}\] Despite the differences in focus or purpose found in each of the many studies on the empress, there is a consensus that Julia represents one of the most honoured consorts of the imperial period. Although allusions to her prominence can be found in the ancient literature, the level of prestige afforded to Julia can be more easily observed in the sheer number and variety of coins struck in her honour, from the earliest years of her husband Septimius Severus’ reign (AD 193-211) through to the death of her eldest son Caracalla in 217, not to mention the commemorative issues struck in her honour during the reign of Alexander Severus.\[{2}\] Among the

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\[{1}\] There are a number of publications on the subject of Julia herself as well as her position as one of the famous set of powerful Severan women. For a good selection, see the following: **Baharal 1992**, p. 110-118; **Levick 2007**; **Magnani 2007**; **Saavedra-Guerrero 2007**, p. 120-131.

\[{2}\] The commemorative issues are struck on coinage produced for Julia Mamaea, during the reign of Alexander Severus, see **RIC 715** and **716 Alexander Severus**. For works on Julia’s numismatic legacy, see **Gorrie 2004**, p. 61-72; **Lusnia 1995**, p. 119-140; **Rowan 2011**, p. 241-273.

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many coins struck for Julia, there are two precious metal types produced in the aftermath of Septimius Severus’ death in 211, included in the *Roman Imperial Coinage*, that warrant further discussion owing to questions surrounding the identity of the figure depicted on the reverse. [3]

Struck in both *aurei* and *denarii*, these coins depict an obverse bust of Julia Domna draped and facing right, her hair presented in its distinctive wavy and undulating style but without either the diadem or crescent found on other coins of the same period. The obverse also carries the legend *IVLIA PIA FELIX AVG*. The reverse depicts a female figure (standing on *RIC* 380, seated on *RIC* 381) facing left, holding a branch and long sceptre. The reverse legend is honorific in nature: *MAT AVGG* *MAT SEN M PATR*.

![Fig. 1 – Denarius of Julia Domna depicting the empress as Concordia (RIC 381). Numismatica Ars Classica Auction 64 (17 May 2012) lot 1217. (Image reproduced courtesy of NAC – scale 300%)](image)

The first point of discussion regarding these coins concerns the nature of Julia’s titulature. The appearance of *PIA FELIX* on the obverse suggests that the coins were struck after the death of Septimius Severus, while the use of the plural construction *mater augurorum* (*MAT AVGG*) on the reverse indicates that they were also produced prior to the murder of Geta in late December of AD 211. [4] This combination of information, therefore, allows a fairly confident dating of the coin types in question to the latter half of 211 but no later, significantly more specific than the general period 211–215 offered in the *RIC*. [5]

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[3] These coins are found in volume 4.1 of the *RIC* and will be referred to henceforth as *RIC* 380 and 381 respectively.


Regarding the reverse image depicted on these coins, the general consensus states that the figure simply represents Julia herself, an image of the empress accompanying her prestigious titles.\[6\] The appearance of a head-dress on \textit{RIC} 380 makes a definitive identification difficult, but the hypothesis certainly appears to be strengthened when it is observed that the figure found on \textit{RIC} 381 clearly exhibits features of a hairstyle synonymous with Julia: intricate waves flow from the scalp and down the side of the empress’ head, the tightly woven edging and bun gathered neatly at the back (see Fig. 1). The appearance of a hairstyle similar to that associated with the empress, however, is not sufficient evidence in itself to conclude that \textit{RIC} 380 and 381 represent depictions of Julia Domna without any additional inference or meaning to the iconography.

It has already been noted that the figure represented on these coins, whether standing or seated, carries both a branch and a sceptre. The appearance of the latter item in particular, a symbol of ultimate authority and power usually associated with emperors or deities, is of interest since it would be an extremely irregular accoutrement to accompany a standard depiction of an empress, even one with such evident prestige as Julia Domna. It seems more likely that if these coins do indeed depict the empress, they do so by depicting her in the form of a deity, similar to the figure claimed to represent Julia as the goddess Cybele (\textit{RIC} 562) struck at some point between the years 209–211.\[7\]

It is perhaps owing to this potentially unusual depiction of Julia that the \textit{RIC} also offers an alternative explanation regarding the reverse: rather than depicting the empress, the figure represents a personification of \textit{Pax} instead. This alternative hypothesis would certainly better explain the appearance of the branch and sceptre accompanying the figure, since the numismatic representation of Peace is often depicted carrying both of these items.\[8\]

\[6\] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 254–255. Julie Langford-Johnson has claimed that the figure is ‘iconographic shorthand’ representing Julia Domna’s role as \textit{genetrix} to the Severan dynasty, accepting the fundamental identification of the female as Julia. For more on this, see Langford-Johnson 2005, p. 160.

\[7\] This is another example where the significance of the reverse inscription \textit{MATER AVG G} has been overlooked. The abbreviation of \textit{augustorum} can again be employed to provide a more specific dating of the coin between 209 and 211 rather than the rather nebulous 196–211 period offered in the \textit{Roman Imperial Coinage}. The extent to which it can be confidently said to represent Julia in the guise of Cybele, rather than simply the goddess in her own right, is questionable though.

\[8\] This style of depiction can be observed across the imperial period. For some examples of this figure with an accompanying \textit{Pax} legend, see (in chronological order): \textit{RIC} 770 Vespasian, \textit{RIC} 168 Alexander Severus, \textit{RIC} 157 Volusian. It is also worth noting the precious metal coinage of Tiberius (\textit{RIC} 29, for example) in which a similar figure appears, carrying the same accoutrements. This case might prima facie seem central to the later Severan case, since it has been claimed that this figure may represent Livia in the guise of \textit{Pax}. The Tiberian coin is a more problematic case, however, since it has also been suggested that the female was supposed to represent
A potential objection to this theory, however, is that if this identification is indeed correct, then these types would form the only allusion to Pax found on the coinage of Julia Domna throughout both the reigns of Septimius Severus and Caracalla. Furthermore, it should be noted that rather than increasing, the number of reverse themes paired with obverses of Julia appears to have declined and shrunk in the aftermath of Septimius Severus’ death and during the reign of Caracalla.\[9\] Given this context, it would seem highly unlikely that the types found on RIC 380 and 381 represent a hitherto unacknowledged depiction of Pax in connection with the empress.\[11\] A third potential explanation is required.

Rather than depicting the empress in her own right or as a personification of Peace, the evidence can equally be interpreted to suggest that RIC 380 and 381 were intended to present Julia Domna in the guise of another deity: Concordia. Similar to but distinct from Pax, the deification of harmony had a long association with Rome prior to the Severan era, with the first temple of Concord erected in the capital by Furius Camillus in 367 BC.\[12\] Concordia appears to have featured on coinage for the first time in 62/61 BC and was later struck notably on coins produced for Mark Antony during the Civil Wars which marked the end of the Republic.\[13\] During the Prin-
pate, the deity was used to promote a sense of concord established by the emperors, paired with the legend CONCORDIA AUGUSTA, especially in periods of unrest such as the Year of the Four Emperors. The theme also became increasingly linked with the figures of the empresses and the notion of an internal harmony within the imperial household, being observed for the first time with Domitia, struck between AD 81-84, and becoming more common under the later Antonine empresses.

In the case of Julia Domna, Concordia is a type that can be found on the empress’ coinage during the reign of her husband from 193 until 211. From analysis of data gathered from an extensive hoard sample, Clare Rowan has identified that Concordia appears on two percent of the total silver coinage output for Julia during the reign of Severus. From the same evidence, she has demonstrated that the deity is also found in vastly increased quantities associated with the other women of the Severan dynasty, namely Plautilla (37%), Julia Paula (85%), Aquilia Severa (99%) and Orbia-na (99%). The importance of this iconography to imperial wives, compared to mothers, is striking, but it need not change the identification of the earlier coin of Caligula (bmc 36; ric 33), depicting his sisters as Securitas, Concordia and Fortuna on the reverse might seem to form an odd omission, but it must be remembered that this coin was struck in honour of the emperor rather than his sisters and carries his portrait on the obverse.

Concordia was a theme of general importance to the early Severan dynasty, and one which Septimius Severus employed in three distinct ways. In the earliest years of his reign, during the Wars of Succession against Pescennius Niger and later Clodius Albinus, the majority of this iconography was decidedly militaristic in nature, stressing the military power under Severus’ command by declaring the harmony that the emperor enjoyed with the Roman army. With the pretenders to the throne defeated, there was a visible shift in emphasis, the emperor’s family becoming the central

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[14] For two examples, see bmc 57 Galba and bmc 48 Vitellius. These examples are also of interest to the later Julia Domna coins, since in both cases the figure of Concordia is depicted carrying both the branch and sceptre. Her identity is beyond question, owing to the reverse legend CONCORD AVG S-C in both cases.

[15] For the Domitia coin, bearing the legend CONCORD AVGST and depicting a peacock standing right, see: RIC 212; BMC 61. For data concerning the Antonine empresses, see Rowan 2011, p. 244-246. The earlier coin of Caligula (bmc 36; ric 33) depicting his sisters as Securitas, Concordia and Fortuna on the reverse might seem to form an odd omission, but it must be remembered that this coin was struck in honour of the emperor rather than his sisters and carries his portrait on the obverse.

[16] RIC 547, for example, depicts Julia clasping hands with Severus, with the accompanying legend: CONCORDIA FELIX.


[18] Ibid., p. 272.

[19] RIC 108, for example, derives from the early period and depicts the deity standing, holding a military standard in each hand, with the accompanying legend CONCORDIAE MILITVM.
focus of the *Concordia* imagery produced by the imperial government. The unity of the imperial family was stressed through a variety of visual media, as examples such as the Berlin Tondo, the family friezes on the Arch of the *Argentarii* and those found on the Severan Arch at *Lepcis Magna* testify.\(^{[20]}\)

The overall strength and unity of the dynasty was also promoted intensively at the Secular Games of 204.\(^{[21]}\)

In the numismatic corpus, certain familial relationships were emphasised more owing to their importance to the Severan dynasty’s long-term political survival. Severus made reference to the success of his marriage to Julia, mirroring earlier Antonine propaganda, through coinage bearing both Severus and Julia’s busts on the reverse, wearing radiate and lunate crowns respectively, with the legend *CONCORDIAE AETERNAE*.\(^{[22]}\) Similarly, a plethora of coins struck for Caracalla in the opening years of the third century publicise the harmony between the young *Augustus* and Plautilla, married in 202.\(^{[23]}\)

The emphasis on the concord between the emperors themselves during this period also formed one of the most constitutionally important facets of imperial harmony prior to the death of Septimius Severus. The unity between Severus and Caracalla as co-*Augusti* was promoted through coinage declaring *AETERNITAS IMPERII*, with draped and laureate busts of the two emperors facing one another on the reverse.\(^{[24]}\) This message of internal harmony was extended later to include the tempestuous fraternal relationship between Caracalla and Geta upon the latter’s elevation to the position of *Augustus* in 209. In one type, for example, the brothers are depicted standing next to one another and holding a victory between them; the legend *CONCORDIA AVGVSTORVM* leaves little doubt regarding the message to be taken from the numismatic iconography.\(^{[25]}\)

The desire of both Septimius Severus and Julia Domna to reconcile their warring children is well-attested in the ancient literature covering the period. Severus is reported to have warned his sons of the inevitable disaster that followed fraternal enmity in famous tales and legends and, according to Cassius Dio, used his final words imploring his sons to seek concord with

\(^{[20]}\) All of these examples were defaced to some extent during the process of the *damnatio memoriae* enacted following the murders of Plautianus in 205 and Geta in 211. For more on this, see Flower 2008, p. 97–115.

\(^{[21]}\) For more on the political use of the Secular Games, see Gorrie 2002, p. 461–481.

\(^{[22]}\) *RIC* 522.

\(^{[23]}\) *BMC* 306.272, for example, depicts the couple on the reverse clasping hands, with the accompanying legend *CONCORDIA FELIX*. The propagandistic nature of this coin type is clear when the disastrous nature of the marriage is analysed. Herodian (3.10.8) noted, for example, that Caracalla had only married her under compulsion from Severus. For more on the marriage, see: Dio 77.1.1–4.5, 77.6.3 (Loeb numbering system); *Hdn* 3.10.3–8.

\(^{[24]}\) *RIC* 250.

\(^{[25]}\) See *RIC* 255 and 330a for two examples of this type.
one another in the aftermath of his imminent death. For her part, Julia is reported to have continued to seek a lasting reconciliation between her sons after the death of her husband. Herodian, for example, recounted how the empress reacted to her sons’ plans to divide the empire itself into two halves: ‘She began weeping and crying out. Then she threw her arms around them both and drew them into an embrace, trying to reconcile them.’ Indeed, in Dio’s account, it is specifically this desire to unite her sons which ultimately allowed Caracalla to construct a plot to strike at Geta while separated from his many bodyguards. Langford-Johnson has raised the intriguing possibility that the Senate may have opted to bestow the honorific mater senatus title on Julia in the aftermath of Septimius Severus’ death precisely because they perceived her to be a ‘champion of harmony’, perhaps the only figure left in the imperial court that might engineer a lasting settlement between Caracalla and Geta.

It is in the context of this period of increasing tension between the brothers in the latter half of 211, then, that RIC 380 and 381 ought to be considered. It should come as no surprise to observe a continuation of Concordia iconography appearing in the numismatic record for the empress. As the widow of one emperor and the mother of two more, Julia’s coinage during these months appears to have continued to carry the message promoted extensively during the reign of Septimius Severus: that the imperial household was united and strong. It should also be noted that the ancient writers suggest that even the warring Caracalla and Geta did attempt to create a façade of harmony, albeit a very transparent one. Dio claimed that the emperors made public declarations of love and pride in each other despite being diametrically opposed. This outward display of unity is also found

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[26] For Severus’ warnings, see Herodian 3.13.3. The imperative used by Dio (77.15.2) in recording Severus’ supposed final words, ὁμονοεῖτε, is significant since the Greek concept of Homonoia is equivalent to the Latin Concordia.

[27] Hdn 4.3.9 (tr. Whittaker).

[28] Dio (78.2.2) claimed that Caracalla induced Julia to summon both sons to a meeting as an intermediary, probably so as not to arouse Geta’s suspicions regarding Caracalla’s motive behind the request.

[29] Langford-Johnson 2013, p. 21 & 2005, p. 185. It seems evident from the ancient literature that there was an atmosphere of tension in Rome following the return of the imperial family from Britain. Dio (78.1.4–5) claimed, for example, that the Senate ordered a sacrifice to Concordia but that the officials could not locate each other to perform the rite. Whilst this has clearly been inserted into Dio’s prose to suggest both the irreparable state of Caracalla and Geta’s fraternal relationship and the inevitable violence that would come of it, it can be inferred, at least, that the senators were eager to promote harmony between the two young Augusti.

[30] Dio 78.1.4. Similarly, Herodian (4.1.4–5) claimed that the emperors lived completely separate lives within the palace walls and that they only came together when attending functions in public.
in the numismatic record. \[^{[31]}\] It is all too easy to view the fraternal relationship from a position of hindsight, where the eventual violence seems to have been inevitable. If it is accepted instead that the young *Augusti* at least attempted to project an outward image of harmony, then these coin types would make sense as an extension to the prevailing public message of the time. \[^{[32]}\]

If examined in this manner, the coin types struck for Julia Domna seen in *RIC* 380 and 381 are not a simple depiction of the empress in her own right as the *mater augustorum*, nor are they indicative of an innovation whereby the iconography of *Pax* became associated with her for a period of months only to disappear before the end of the same year. Instead, these coins make better sense if interpreted as depicting either *Concordia* or Julia in the guise of *Concordia*. As such, they can be viewed not only as a continuation of one strand of Severan propaganda that had been continually promoted since the turn of the third century, but also one which was publically (if not privately) promoted by the young emperors Caracalla and Geta in the aftermath of their father’s death.

\[^{[31]}\] It is important to note that Julia’s coins were not alone in declaring harmony within the imperial household during this time. Coinage struck for both Caracalla and Geta can also be shown to have promoted this message during the first decade of the third century across both precious and base metal denominations, a trend which continued after Severus’ death. For selected examples of this iconography struck for Caracalla, see: *RIC* 152, 459, 482, 508a-c and 537. For those of Geta, see: *RIC* 40, 73a-b, 85, 86a-b, 134a-b, 164, 165 and 184.

\[^{[32]}\] This conclusion ultimately raises the issue of the agency behind this numismatic iconography. Noreña has persuasively argued that coinage could be an effective vehicle for political messages and propaganda, but the question of who chose the imagery remains more controversial, see Noreña 2010, p. 251-260. Despite Howgego’s insistence that the problem is irrelevant since, under an autocracy, the numismatic output inevitably would be favourable to the regime, evidence from sources such as Suetonius and *De Rebus Bellicis* suggests that the emperors sometimes took an active interest in their coinage, see Howgego 2001, p. 70-71; Suet. Aug. 94.12, Nero 25.2; *De reb. bell.* 1.3-4. Whilst routine type selection was probably undertaken by mint magistrates, it also seems probable that they would often act in response to directives from the imperial household. Unlike the later case of Julia Soaemias, who may have exerted a greater influence over her own coinage, owing to Elagabalus’ relative youth, Julia Domna’s coinage continually reflects and extends the iconography promoted by the incumbent emperors, both in the case of her husband and her sons. For more on the coinage of Julia Soaemias, see Rowan 2011, pp. 244, 261-265.
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