

Gods of Cultivation and Food Supply in the Imperial Iconography of Septimius Severus

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This article deals with the question of the role of gods involved with cultivation, grain and food supply in the Roman imperial iconography during the reign of Septimius Severus. By evaluating numismatic and written evidence, as well as inscriptions, the article discusses which gods related to grain and cultivation received most attention from Septimius Severus, and how their use helped the emperor to stabilize his rule.

It appears that the three main deities used by Severus were Annona, Ceres and Tellus. The use of Annona and Ceres was concentrated in the first years of Severan rule, when the emperor was out of the capital and fighting wars. Apparently, the importance of Annona, the goddess symbolizing imperial food supply, was connected with the acts of the emperor: wars and other crisis were periods when food supplies to the capital were often under threat. When Severus returned to Rome for a somewhat longer period, more emphasis was put on Tellus, traditional goddess of agriculture and a deity connected with a Golden Age – as the emperor was now in the capital, this meant an age of peace and plenty for his subjects. As a result, it could be argued that the use of fertility gods was closely related to the acts of Severus himself – thus legitimizing his image as a protector of his subjects.

Introduction

The intention of this article is to approach the question of the relationship between legitimizing imperial power and gods involved with cultivation, grain and food supply during the reign of Septimius Severus in the late second and early third century CE. Evaluating numismatic evidence, as well as literature, my aim is to find out which gods related to grain and cultivation received most attention from the emperor, and how their use helped the emperor to stabilize his rule. Some observations will also be made on how they were connected to other gods with major importance for the Severan dynasty from the viewpoint of legitimizing power.

The early Severan period is an interesting era from this perspective, as Rome had just suffered a civil war, something the Romans had not experienced for over

a hundred years.¹ The result of this was that a new emperor without any direct connection to the earlier dynasty had risen to the throne. This situation provided a tough challenge for Severus. He had to demonstrate that he was the true and legitimate emperor and he had to keep the empire and especially the capital calm after a period of crisis.² The task was not made easier by the fact that Severus was not connected with the traditional elites of the capital; he can be considered an outsider, for some scholars even an “alien”.

Severus was a native of Lepcis Magna, North Africa. His “Africanness” has been a debated issue among modern researchers. Severus’ Punic roots are highlighted especially by Anthony Birley, and the emperor’s interest towards the cult of Serapis is also considered a sign of African identity.³ These ideas are nowadays somewhat disputed. Lepcis Magna was more or less Romanized long before the birth of Severus, and the two families (the Fulvii and the Septimii) from which the family of Severus descended, were very much of Italian origin. Moreover, the Severan interest in Serapis can hardly be considered an African feature: the same god was given attention already by Vespasian (who was definitely not an African) long before Severus.⁴ Ancient sources do not give much proof of Severus’ African identity either.⁵

To claim that Severus considered himself primarily an African might be an exaggeration, but as an emperor he most definitely was an “outsider” regarding the succession of the emperors, as he had no ties with the Antonine dynasty which had ruled Rome for about a hundred years before him.⁶ As a result, he was obliged to put a great deal of effort into imperial propaganda to legitimize his power. Despite being a usurper, Severus tried to reassure Romans that he was a legitimate follower of Marcus Aurelius, the last emperor of the Antonine dynasty. His most famous act in this aspect was his self-made adoption, declaring himself a son of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus’ brother. Moreover, many other actions of his were very similar to those of Marcus Aurelius, and contemporary writers mention many prodigies and other occasions that can be found from the descriptions of Marcus Aurelius’ reign as well. They would appear to be Severus’ imperial propaganda, highlighting the similarities between him and Aurelius. Inscriptions, numismatic evidence and

¹ The previous civil war before Severus had taken place in 69, “the year of the four emperors”. As a result, Vespasian took power and established Flavian dynasty. See Greenhalgh 1975 for discussion.

² For Severus’ rise to power, see Birley 1999, 81-128.

³ Birley 1999, 1-46. For Serapis, a god very popular especially in Egypt (with an immense temple in Alexandria) as an evidence of the “Africanness” of Severus, see McCann 1968, 53.

⁴ Barnes 1967, 94-95; Takács 2008, 115-116.

⁵ Neither Cassius Dio nor Herodian, two contemporary historians, mention anything about Severus as an African emperor. *Historia Augusta* claims that Septimius Severus’ sister did not know how to speak Latin, but this seems to be a joke: see Benjamin 2004, 333.

⁶ This apparently was a major problem for Severus, as he eventually proclaimed himself to be the son of Marcus Aurelius. Birley 1999, 117.

portraits also show the similarities between Septimius Severus and his Antonine “father”.⁷

However, the political situation created chances for Severus to find some new ways to strengthen his position, and when we evaluate these “new ways”, we should naturally turn to the imperial policy of that period. Numismatic evidence is particularly important, as the coinage can be seen not only as a tool of trade, but also as a means for the emperor to transmit messages to his subjects, messages he considered important and wanted to highlight. While it is sometimes debated who was actually responsible for striking the coinage and choosing the subjects of the coins, it seems plausible that the emperor at least took part in the process of deciding the titles, portraits and other details which appeared on the new coinage.⁸ Moreover, it is quite clear that people who received and handled this coinage thought that the coins (and the iconography they contained) were indeed endorsed by the emperor and his close officials.⁹ Finally, it should be noticed that while it is true that the themes on the coinage remained very similar throughout the centuries, from one emperor to another, we can nevertheless notice small but important innovations, or different subjects presented on the coins receiving more emphasis than others during the reigns of different emperors.

The fact that traditionalism was so evident in the Roman coinage means that even small novelties in the coins are important. It usually benefited the new emperor to keep to traditional themes because it was a good way for him to tie his reign to the chain of earlier emperors, a tool which legitimized his power. Thus, whenever innovations are found in Roman coinage, they were truly considered important messages from the emperor, as they represented stepping outside the tradition.¹⁰ The same can be said about another important source of ancient history, namely inscriptions. These public monuments, erected by emperors to commemorate their deeds, often followed the examples of earlier inscriptions. Consequently, when

⁷ For Septimius Severus and his identification with the Antonines in his deeds and propaganda, see Baharal 1996: 20-42.

⁸ Lusnia 1995, 120. Barbara Levick has argued that messages contained in Roman coinage were actually directed from below to the upper rungs of the political hierarchy. She rejects the claim that the emperor himself was active in choosing the subjects of the coins, and argues that this was done by officials, such as senatorial *tresviri monetales*, a high imperial official like the secretary *a rationibus*, or a lower mint official like the *procurator monetae*. Consequently, the coins' messages were created by lower officials celebrating and respecting the emperor (Levick 1982, 104-116). Levick's article has important observations which warn us not to oversimplify imperial practices concerning coinage policy. On the other hand, Andrew Wallace-Hadrill reminds us that coinage, even if the symbols it contained were selected by various imperial officials below the emperor, still invoked authority, and “the message of the coin is not an extra, over and above the mark of authority, but is part of the process of legitimization” (Wallace-Hadrill 1986, 84). In other words, coins played an important part in the imperial policy of strengthening the emperor's power. Taking this into consideration, it is very plausible that even if the various officials were responsible for choosing the coins' subjects, they must have known very well what the emperor expected from them, and the values on which the ruler wanted to base his power.

⁹ Ando 2000, 212.

¹⁰ Horster 2007, 292-293.

we find novelties and new practices among them, it may well point to something important.¹¹

The literary sources from the Severan era include two contemporary historians, Cassius Dio and Herodian. With both there are, however, problems: Dio is sometimes described as an uncritical writer, lacking deep analysis and with an inability to notice great historical events of his own time.¹² Herodian is even more criticized, as he is claimed to be a “stylist” who just wanted to tell a good story without troubling himself too much with facts.¹³ However, both writers do provide contemporary witness and are valuable as such – Dio from the very core of the empire, as he acted as a senator (and later even as a consul) in the Severan period. Even Herodian, despite his shortcomings, can be seen as a writer who provides a reasonably chronological account.¹⁴ In addition to Cassius Dio and Herodian, Severus' biography in *Historia Augusta* provides much information about the era. Unfortunately, this source, which was written much later – a collection of biographies of emperors and major usurpers – is an extremely complicated case. Most of the biographies in *Historia Augusta* are widely considered to be unreliable fiction. It is, however, also understood that the first part of the collection is somewhat more reliable than later sections, and the biography of Septimius Severus belongs to this “better” part,¹⁵ which somehow justifies its use – although with caution.

Protectors of Supply and Fertility

When we take a closer look at the Severan coinage, there is especially one deity connected to grain that appears regularly – Annona. Strictly speaking, Annona was not a fertility goddess as such, as she was not directly responsible for securing growth or agriculture, but instead considered to be the divine personification of the grain supply to the city of Rome. Her close connection with the capital can be observed from the fact that almost all examples that we know of Roman coinage presenting Annona were minted in Rome; two exceptions being a coin type minted in Lugdunum (modern Lyons) and another in the Syrian city of Laodicea. The former example is from the reign of Nero, and possibly refers to imperial favours regarding the rebuilding of Lugdunum, as apparently the city had suffered a devastating fire in the year 65 CE (as reported by Seneca).¹⁶ The case of Laodicea, a city in Syria, is related to the civil war between Severus and Pescennius Niger (in 193-194); after

¹¹ For discussion, see Rantala 2013, 22-24.

¹² Millar 1964, 118; 171.

¹³ Birley 1999, 204.

¹⁴ Rantala 2013, 27-28.

¹⁵ Barnes 1978, 32-78.

¹⁶ Seneca, *Epistulae ad Lucilium*, 91.

Severus had defeated his opponent he rewarded those cities who had shown him support. As a result, Laodicea became the new capital of the province, as well as receiving *ius Italicum* (an honour granting certain rights, tax exemption, etc.).

Despite not being a goddess of fertility in the narrower sense, Annona was closely connected to the goddess Ceres, who was more of a traditional goddess of growth. In fact, Ceres Frugifera, the bearer of crops, is another deity who often appears in Severan coinage. These two gods are the most important deities connected to grain and growth who can be found in the numismatic material from the first seven years of Severus' reign.

Annona was a figure who belonged to the so-called deified virtues.¹⁷ The roots of worshipping these gods can be traced from the Republican period, when certain ideas received religious honours and attention due to their importance; these included Concordia (harmony), Fides (good faith), Fortuna (luck), Libertas (freedom), and many more. Their significance increased even more from the beginning of the Imperial period. During this era, new divine virtues appeared alongside the older ones; some of the deities, both old and new, received extensive cult worship and temples, while others had a more modest role in Roman religious life.¹⁸

Annona was one of the new deities. From the Imperial era on, the goddess was represented in iconography, and also appeared in cultic life. She was considered to be a figure who symbolized the emperor's power to care for his people by securing the food supply and the provisions of grain, although we cannot find her in the stories of Roman mythology. However, as a part of the imperial cult, dedications and offerings were given to her by private individuals who wanted to express their gratitude, or who were seeking favours. Generally, it could be argued that Annona was not, strictly speaking, an independent goddess, but rather from the very beginning, closely connected with imperial policy.

Annona appears in the coinage from the reign of Nero onward. During that time, the so called Cult of Virtues was created, in the aftermath of the Pisonian conspiracy.¹⁹ From the very beginning Annona was often pictured together with Ceres; in addition, the goddess Abundantia was sometimes depicted with these two.²⁰ After Nero, Annona appeared before Severus in the coinage of Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, Trajan, Hadrian and Antoninus Pius. Trajan, especially, showed much interest in Annona. The goddess was one of the many virtues, alongside of deities such as Fecunditas, Spes, and Securitas, which highlighted the idea of a

17 Sometimes the gods of the group are called "personifications" or "deifications of abstract ideas", but as Fears (1981b, 832-833) has shown, this lacks justification in the ancient sources; hence, it would be much more appropriate to use the term "virtues".

18 Fears 1981b, 830-833, 889-910.

19 The Pisonian conspiracy was a plot against Nero that took place in 65 CE. The members of the conspiracy consisted of many prominent figures, including Senator Gaius Calpurnius Piso as the leader. The plan failed and 19 people were executed (or forced to commit suicide, including Seneca the Younger). Tacitus, *Annales* 15.48-74 is the main source for the conspiracy. Fears 1981b, 897.

20 Fears 1981b, 895-897.

return to old virtues; in addition, these virtues were supposed to highlight Trajan's reign as a new, prosperous era for humankind. This idea is related to the fact that Annona of Trajan often appeared with a child-figure, symbolizing the future of the empire.²¹

Severus started to use Annona in his coinage from the very early period of his rule onwards. Beginning in 194, the goddess appears regularly in Severan coins until 201 (except for the year 200), and then again in 206-207.²² The first images of Annona displayed her standing, with her foot on a prow, with ears of corn and a cornucopia.²³ Another Severan image of Annona, presented the goddess standing and holding ears of corn, a *modius* and a cornucopia.²⁴ The third variant included the goddess seated, with ears of corn on her lap.²⁵ It is obvious that the prow indicated the grain supply to the capital (carried by ships, of course); ears of corn and a cornucopia, on the other hand, were very typical symbols of abundance, as well as *modius*, a Roman unit for dry measures. They appeared with many deities over the centuries, reminding people that the food supply was secure and that the grain storages were full.

As Annona as a symbol of the grain supply to the capital appears to be an important figure in Severan coinage, it is noteworthy that written sources covering the Severan period also point out how much effort the emperor put into securing a grain supply to the capital. In fact, it is claimed that the first act of Severus, after he had had his predecessor Julianus murdered, was to take care of grain distribution. This is reported in *Historia Augusta*, which also reports that later, during the civil war against Pescennius Niger, Severus sent troops to fight in North Africa and Egypt, two provinces critical for the food production (most of the grain distributed in the capital indeed came from these two districts). Apparently Severus was worried that Niger would be able to halt the food imports and weaken the position of Severus in Rome.²⁶ The same source also mentions how Severus later fought in North Africa against local tribes who had conquered Tripolis. Severus was eventually successful in his campaign and liberated the city.²⁷

Severus did not only fight wars to show people his ability to secure a food supply; his politics included increasing the amount of food rations distributed to the people as well. Grain had already been distributed, of course, for many generations before Septimius Severus – the practice had started in the late republican era, and the imperial period saw the emperors continuing this tradition. Even if there are

21 Fears 1981b, 897.

22 Garnsey 1988, 226.

23 See e.g. *RIC* (=Roman Imperial Coinage) 4.1 nos. 57, 75, 107, 123 and 135 (Septimius Severus).

24 *RIC* 4.1 nos. 677, 681, 748 and 751 (Septimius Severus).

25 *RIC* 4.1 no. 156.

26 *Historia Augusta, Severus* 8.6.

27 *Historia Augusta, Severus* 18.3.

traces that Augustus tried to somewhat decrease the distribution system,²⁸ and that sometimes the process was temporary suspended, it became impossible to abolish; this would have been politically dangerous.²⁹ However, some reforms were occasionally made in the grain distribution policy. For example, it was probably Nero who included soldiers amongst those to whom the grain doles were granted. It was, however, Septimius Severus who started to distribute oil.³⁰ This was possibly done in 202, when he celebrated his tenth year in power. According to Cassius Dio, this occasion saw all kinds of spectacles, public banquets and gifts to celebrate Severus' return and his victories.³¹ The number of people entitled to grain distribution – and to free oil – in the early third century was perhaps 200,000; this means that the vast majority of the inhabitants of the city did not receive free grain.³² It still was, however, an impressive number and helped Severus to strengthen his position.

Ceres, another deity connected with fertility that appeared in Severan coinage, was one of the oldest goddesses of the Romans. Ceres had many roles, but as Ceres Frugifera, appearing in the Severan coinage with this epithet, she was considered a bearer of crops. As mentioned earlier, Annona often appeared as a companion of Ceres; in the coinage they can be seen together for the first time during the reign of Nero, and there is at least one Severan example (probably from the year 200 or 201) depicting Annona and Ceres as a pair in a very traditional manner, Annona holding a cornucopia and facing Ceres, with an altar and a ship also represented.³³



Fig. 1 Sestertius of Nero, Lugdunum mint; struck in 66 CE, with Annona and Ceres depicted as a pair. On left Annona standing, facing right, holding cornucopia; on right, Ceres seated facing left, holding grain-ears and torch; modius on garlanded altar between them; ship's stern behind (RIC I 494). Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

²⁸ Suetonius, *Augustus* 42.3.

²⁹ Garnsey 1988, 211-214, 236-239.

³⁰ *Historia Augusta*, *Severus* 18.3; see also Garnsey 1988, 236-238. *Historia Augusta* claims that in the 270's emperor Aurelian started to distribute pork and cheap wine as well: see *Historia Augusta*, *Aurelianus* 35.2, 48.1.

³¹ Cassius Dio 77.1

³² The number of people living in the capital during the early third century is difficult to estimate. It is suggested that at the beginning of the imperial era the number of inhabitants amounted to about one million, and it apparently remained so until at least the mid-second century (see Garnsey & Saller 1987, 6 and 62). It is possible that the Antonine plague in the mid-second century decreased the number, although this is far from certain – see Bruun 2006, 207-214.

³³ RIC 4.1 no. 756 (Septimius Severus)

In the Severan coinage, Ceres was especially connected with the empress Julia Domna. This is by no means a Severan novelty; the deity can also be found in the coinage dedicated to most of the Antonine imperial women. There are, moreover, many other examples, like gems or statues identifying empresses with Ceres.³⁴ Julia Domna's coinage follows the imperial tradition quite closely, as the goddess is depicted holding various symbols of fertility, such as ears of corn or a basket of fruit.³⁵

While images of Ceres reminded people about imperial rule and its devotion towards the goddess who protected agricultural security in the empire, it has also been claimed that imperial women were identified with Ceres because the goddess was a symbol of the ideal woman, placing an emphasis on such qualities as chastity, female fertility and motherhood.³⁶ From this point of view, it is noteworthy that as Severan coinage started to associate Julia with Ceres, the empress also received many titles honouring her as a "mother": in 195 she became *mater castrorum*, during the next year she became *mater caesaris*, and in 198 she received the title of *mater augusti et caesaris*.³⁷ This can be noticed from the coinage of the period as well: from 196 on, Julia was titled in various coins as *mater augustorum* and *mater castrorum* – and even *mater deum*.³⁸ The promotion of motherhood and chastity is also apparent in Severan legislation. During that period, much emphasis was placed on laws against adultery as well as laws promoting the family, proper morals, chastity, and so on.³⁹ As a result, it seems quite obvious that associating Julia Domna with "mothers" in the imperial propaganda is related to the general policy of Severus, which highlighted values closely related to ideal motherhood.

Tellus and the Imperial Guardians

The third deity connected with grain and agriculture that received attention in the Severan iconography was Tellus. By the Severan period she was, as was the case with Ceres, already known by Romans for hundreds of years. Her temple on the Esquiline hill dates from 268 BCE, but apparently she was worshipped by the Romans even earlier. Ovid described Tellus as a patroness of places of cultivation; the poet stressed that she should not be confused with Ceres, who was goddess

³⁴ Keltanen 2002, 120-121, 146.

³⁵ RIC 4.1 nos. 546, 616^a-618, 636, 848-850 (Julia Domna)

³⁶ Keltanen 2002, 121.

³⁷ Kettenhofen 1979, 83-85; later, her full title was *mater augusti/imperatoris et castrorum et senatus et patriae* – mother of the emperor, of the camps, and the senate and the fatherland. Later still, she was also known as *mater populi Romani* – mother of the Roman people. Levick 2007, 82.

³⁸ RIC 4.1 nos. 562-570 (Julia Domna).

³⁹ For Severan moral laws, see Birley 1999, 165 and Gorrie 2004, 61-65.

of the origins of cultivation.⁴⁰ Later Augustine, quoting Varro, mentioned that Tellus was sometimes associated with other deities considered as earth goddesses, such as Magna Mater, Ops, Proserpina and Vesta.⁴¹ Even if Tellus was a very old deity among the Romans, she did not have a festival of her own in the Roman ritual calendar. However, she was worshipped in one of the most ancient rituals of Rome, *fordicidia*. This festival, which took place in April, celebrated the fertility of the land and flocks.⁴²

Tellus was a goddess who appeared quite regularly in imperial iconography. She appeared already in Augustan art and poetry, but it was especially Hadrian who marked attention to the goddess. During his reign Tellus was connected with peaceful farming and working in the fields – in the Hadrianic coinage she was depicted as the goddess of agriculture in general. Of other pre-Severan emperors, Antoninus Pius and Commodus were rulers who quite often used Tellus for propaganda purposes.⁴³



Fig.2 The female goddess of fertility in the Altar of Augustan Peace (built in 13 BCE), usually identified as Tellus. Photo: Jussi Rantala.

Septimius Severus continued the tradition of depicting Tellus in imperial coinage; she first appeared in the Severan coins in 200 or 201, portrayed with cornucopia and personifications of four seasons (e.g. with Autumn holding a basket

40 Ovid, *Fasti* 1.657 ff., 671 ff., 4.629 ff.

41 Augustine, *De civitate Dei*. 7. 23-24. When evaluating Augustine's text, some caution is needed, though, as his aim as a Christian writer was to display old gods in as bad a light as possible. Combining the rituals of Tellus with a deity like Magna Mater gave him a reason to condemn the worship of Tellus, as rituals for Magna Mater were often considered immoral or at least suspicious even among some supporters of Roman traditional religion.

42 Scullard 1981, 102.

43 Gesztelyi 1981, 442-445.

of fruit, suggesting the agricultural cycle and harvest). While this seems to be a very traditional approach in Roman iconography regarding the goddess, there are some other signs hinting towards Tellus' major importance for Septimius Severus.

An especially noteworthy detail is that during the Severan era, the goddess was connected with Bacchus and Hercules. These two deities were, of course, well known for centuries before Severus. In the imperial era Hercules was a particular favourite of many emperors, especially during the Antonine era. Many ancient sources indicate that particularly the last ruler of the dynasty, Commodus, passionately identified himself with Hercules.⁴⁴ The important role of Hercules continued during the Severan reign, but it seems that Severus wanted to promote him especially alongside another god, Bacchus (or Liber, as he was also known): Cassius Dio writes in his history how Severus used a considerable sum of money to build and repair temples in the capital; of the new buildings, he mentions especially the temple of Bacchus and Hercules.⁴⁵ There were good reasons for Severus to promote these two gods: they had some personal relevance for the emperor as they were the guardian deities of his home town Lepcis Magna. Bacchus and Hercules were, moreover, considered guardian deities of two princes, Caracalla and Geta. This was evident in Roman imperial policy, especially from the mid-190s onwards. During the first years of his reign, Severus made extensive use of Jupiter in his iconography: the coinage of the period demonstrates how a close relationship between the supreme god of the Roman community and the emperor was constructed in a very careful manner. Indeed, after 196 CE, only Severus himself was associated with Jupiter. However, Caracalla and Geta were from that point on linked closely with Bacchus and Hercules. These two gods thus became an essential part of the idea of continuity and the golden future of the empire as they were associated with imperial offspring.⁴⁶

Tellus, Bacchus and Hercules were connected to each other in a very interesting piece of coinage, issued by Septimius Severus to celebrate the Secular Games (*ludi saeculares*), organized in 204 CE. The coin portrays Bacchus and Hercules, with Tellus and the emperor himself; the role of Tellus as a goddess of harvest and fertility is highlighted by representing her with a basket and ears of corn. *Victimarius* with a pig and a flute-player is also present. It apparently depicts a sacrifice that was offered during these celebrations.⁴⁷ In fact, the coin portrays in one single picture many important parts of Severan iconography. Tellus (with a basket and ears of corn) is probably referring to the age of plenty, when food supplies were, again, secured after the uncertain period of civil war. On the other hand, it represents the emperor sacrificing. Even if Severus was an African outsider and his wife a

44 Cassius Dio 73.7.2, 73.15.2-6, 73.20.2, 73.22.3; Herodian 1.14.7-9; *Historia Augusta, Commodus* 8.5, 8.9, 9.2, 10.9, 16.5.

45 Cassius Dio 72.16.3.

46 Fears 1981a, 114-115.

47 Cooley 2007, 392. The coin can be found in RIC 4.1 no. 761 (Septimius Severus).

Syrian princess, his religious policy regarding traditional state religion was very conservative.⁴⁸ Depicting the emperor sacrificing highlighted his *pietas* – dutiful respect towards the gods and the motherland. After the civil war this was something Severus wanted people to remember. Moreover, the coinage also shows dynastic aspirations, as a basically identical coin was issued at the same time, with a single exception: instead of Severus, it portrayed Caracalla, who by 204 CE had already taken the position of a co-ruler of Severus.⁴⁹

Perhaps the most important aspect is, however, that the coin not only combined Tellus with Bacchus and Hercules, deities of major importance for the Severan dynasty, but also with one of the most significant events of the Severan period – *ludi saeculares*. This was a celebration which, in many ways, symbolized the whole Severan rule, and which included Tellus as one of the major deities of the occasion.

Celebrating a New Golden Age

Ludi saeculares – or the Secular Games – was an ancient institution held long before Severus. The key to understanding their major significance for Severus is to realize their unique nature. This was guaranteed by their rarity alone; they consisted of a ceremony that was only supposed to be celebrated once in about a hundred years. The games had already been held in the republican period,⁵⁰ but it seems that the real start of imperial *ludi* occurred when Augustus held them in 17 BCE; even if our sources from the republican era are scarce, it is very probable that Augustus gave the games a new look. The purpose of the games was traditionally to celebrate a passing of an era, or an “age” (*saeculum*),⁵¹ and this remained the case from the republican to the imperial era. However, it seems that in the pre-Augustan games this passing was considered a dark, frightening occasion, where the community jumped more or less into the unknown. Augustus though celebrated the festivals as the beginning of a new Golden Age, a new period of peace, prosperity and wealth.⁵² Apparently, this approach remained more or less the same throughout the

48 Gorrie 2004, 66-67; Levick 2007, 124-144. As Levick mentions, Severan age did see the spread of so-called eastern cults, such as Mithraism and Christianity, but these were spreading from below, not from the top of the empire.

49 Caracalla's coin: RIC 4.1 no. 418.

50 This took place at least in 249 BCE and again in 146 BCE (Liv. 7.2). The festivals of 249 BCE are the first occasion that we can be quite sure of, although ancient authors report that there were three games before those: in 509 BCE (Censorinus 17.10; Plutarch, Publicola. 21; Valerius Maximus 2.4; Zosimus 2.1-3), 449 BCE (Censorinus 17.10) and 348 BCE (Censorinus 17.10; Zosimus 2.1-3). For questions of chronology, see Rantala 2013, 193-199.

51 The idea of “ages” or “eras” in history was quite common in antiquity – in Greek, Etruscan, as well as in Roman culture. Censorinus deals with both Greek and Etruscan views (17.1-5). It seems, however, that the Roman view was influenced especially by the Etruscans – at least in the late republican period. See Hall 1986, 2567-2569. The idea of *saeculum* is based on cyclic theories of time, which were very common thoughts in the ancient world. A great deal of research has been carried out on the subject, the classic study being Eliade 1949.

52 Beard, North, & Price 1999, 201-206.

imperial era, which saw the celebrations of six *ludi*, the Severan celebration being one of them in 204 CE.⁵³

It appears that the imperial rituals remained quite unchanged over the centuries, although the fact remains that the Augustan and Severan games are the only occasions on which we have a good deal of evidence left, for an inscription containing the programme of the festival, erected in Campus Martius, survives from both festivals. The gruesome deities of the underworld, Dis and Proserpina, who had been the gods worshipped in the republican period, were removed from the programme. They were replaced by more “positive” gods and goddesses, who were worshipped for three consecutive nights and days: Moirae (the Fates), Eileithyia and Terra Mater received a sacrifice in the nocturnal rites in Campus Martius, whereas daytime rituals were dedicated to the “Olympian” Roman gods Jupiter, Juno, Apollo and Diana. The festivals also included purificationary rites (*sellisternium*) performed by 110 married women, and a hymn (*Carmen Saeculare*) that was sung by 27 boys and 27 girls at the end of the rituals.⁵⁴

The programme of the *ludi* is interesting in its own right. Regarding deities of fertility, Tellus does appear in the records, although she carries her Greek name Terra Mater. She is clearly the same goddess, for Horace, who composed the *Carmen* performed in the Augustan Secular Games, calls the deity Tellus in his poem.⁵⁵ The inclusion of Tellus/Terra Mater in the Severan *ludi* is perhaps not a very interesting feature as such, as the emperor is here simply following Augustan tradition and uses almost the same programme. However, the remarkable detail is that Tellus is used in the Severan coinage to celebrate such an important and unique festival as the Secular Games of 204. In fact, we have no evidence that other emperors used Tellus when commemorating their own games – even if we have a considerable number of numismatic sources from earlier games, especially from those of Domitian in 88, Tellus is missing completely before Severus. This seems to indicate the important role reserved for the goddess of agriculture in the Severan Golden Age.

53 The celebrations which followed after Augustus were organized by Claudius in 47, only 64 years after Augustus, to celebrate the 800th birthday of Rome. The next occasion occurred in 88 organized by Domitian, then in 148 by Antoninus Pius. Severus held the games, as mentioned, in 204, and the last *ludi saeculares* were held by Philip the Arab in 248, celebrating the Roman millennium. Two cycles are noticeable: Claudius, Antoninus Pius and Philip the Arab held *ludi saeculares* to celebrate Rome's birthday (800, 900 and 1000 years, respectively), whereas Domitian and Septimius Severus followed the original imperial (Augustan) tradition. The immense propaganda value of the games is clear – Claudius was ready to celebrate the games only 64 years after Augustus, even if the proper gap between games should have been about one hundred years. Once these two cycles – Augustan and Claudian – were in place, future emperors followed them. For the list (and sources) of imperial games, see Pighi 1965, 102-103.

54 The inscriptions are *CIL* (= *Corpus Inscriptorum Latinarum*) 6. 32323 (Augustan) and 32326-32335 (Severan). They can also be found in Pighi 1965, 109-119, 140-175. In addition, there is a small fragment remaining from the Claudian inscription (*CIL* 6 32324, Pighi 1965 131-132). Numismatic evidence and literature provide some information on the other imperial *ludi*.

55 Horace, *Carmen Saeculare* 29.

The importance of *ludi saeculares* for Severan rule should not be underestimated. Their significance is better understood when we consider how little time Severus had spent in the capital during his reign before the games. From the year he became emperor (193) until the year 202, he had been in the city of Rome for only a few months. However, when he arrived at the capital in 202 and, after a journey to Africa, returned again in 204, he stayed for a few years in Rome and strengthened his position among the elite of the capital. The period from 202 on witnessed a series of grandiose celebrations, including the tenth anniversary of Severus' rule and, two years later, the *ludi saeculares*. An important part of strengthening the Severan rule was also the grand building programme which took place mainly in the first years of third century CE and was completed when Severus returned to the capital in 204: in fact, it seems that the *ludi saeculares* of 204 was a showcase for the magnificent new appearance of the city, as the rituals of the games were conducted in the parts of the capital which had received intensive restoration.⁵⁶

The Severan *ludi saeculares* as an expression of an age of plenty and prosperity was highlighted by the *Carmen Saeculare*, performed, as explained, at the end of the ceremony. While the Augustan poem composed by Horace is preserved among the poet's works, the Severan *Carmen* is known only from fragments which are included in the inscription containing the programme of the Severan *ludi*.⁵⁷ The composer of this later poem is unknown as well. It is indeed an interesting detail that the poem is included in the Severan monument in the first place. When Augustus erected the inscription about the games of 17 BCE, the last part of the programme simply indicated that the poem was composed by Horace.⁵⁸ In the Severan inscription, the whole poem is included, and it differs significantly from Horace's text. We may therefore suggest that the poem from the Severan games was an excellent tool for the emperor to spread his own message. The Augustan programme already stood as an inscription in Campus Martius when Severus celebrated his own games; as Severus' aim was to assure people that his reign was a legal continuation of earlier imperial periods, he could not depart from the Augustan example too much. However, as the Augustan source did not include *Carmen* at all, Severus had a chance to emphasize the ideas he considered important by adding his poem in the actual inscription – without actually departing from the basic Augustan framework.⁵⁹

The Severan *Carmen Saeculare* features many interesting details: some of them were indeed following the Augustan tradition – such as the invocation of Apollo and Diana at the very beginning of the poem – but mostly it was a

56 Gorrie 2004, 61-72.

57 *Carmen Saeculare* was probably performed in other imperial games as well, but we know practically nothing about the detail of those poems other than the Augustan or Severan versions.

58 *carmen composuit Q. Hor[ati]us Flaccus*. Pighi, comm. lud. quint. 149.

59 For discussion, see Rantala 2013, 127-133.

completely new work.⁶⁰ Of the many novelties in the poem, one interesting feature must be observed: the *Carmen* included a passage celebrating “shores and cities” and “golden fields” of the empire. In addition, the poem honours Neptune, god of the sea, who guaranteed the safe sailing of ships. The end of the poem asks for protection to “our leaders”, referring of course to Septimius Severus and his family.⁶¹ These lines in the inscription could perhaps indicate how one of the most important aspects of the new Severan Golden Age was grain production (golden fields) as well as its safe passage to the capital (cities, shores and protection of Neptune). This would all be happening under the supervision of the “leaders” – Septimius Severus and the rest of the imperial family.

Famines in the Empire: Fears and Responses

To understand the significance of the rather extensive use of a deity such as *Annona* in the Severan coinage, or the connection between *Tellus* and the new Golden Age propagated by Severus, we must realize the importance of food supply, and the fear of famine, among the populace of the capital. Generally, ancient literature provides many stories about famines and food crisis in Rome. However, it is very likely that, at least in the Roman imperial period, actual famines were quite rare. On the other hand, food crises, or food shortages, were more numerous. During the period from Augustus to the late second century, about twenty instances of food crises are mentioned in Roman literature. About half of these took place soon after the civil war, during the Augustan and Tiberian rule, and most of the cases occurred during the first century CE. From the beginning of the second century on, reports become rarer; there are just a couple of cases mentioned from the period of Hadrian to Marcus Aurelius, including the so-called Antonine plague, which included a food crisis, in the 160s.⁶²

The response of the people to a food crisis, or to the possibility of a lack of grain, was often public protest, which was usually loud but seldom violent. Especially public shows were occasions where people could express their discontent towards the ruler, as the emperor himself usually witnessed public spectacles in the capital. It was also a custom that people made requests towards the ruler in public entertainments, and even if it was not necessary for the emperor to assent to these requests, he was nevertheless obliged to listen to the pleas of the people. Moreover, if the emperor turned down these appeals, he had to explain his decision. Generally speaking, attending public spectacles was usually a very safe practice for the emperor; the shows were well controlled and were not a real threat to the regime. It was considered a duty of the ruler to practise the virtue of

60 The poem can be found in Pighi, comm. lud. sept. Va 60-71.

61 Pighi, comm. lud. sept. Va 66-71.

62 Garnsey 1988, 218-225. For Antonine plague, see Bruun 2007.

civilitas, meaning that he should enjoy the pleasure of public entertainments with ordinary people. It could be claimed that the emperor acted as a first citizen among other citizens. At the same time this practice strengthened imperial power, as the emperor himself was present during the spectacular shows he had organized for his subjects.⁶³

Even if the number of food crises decreased in the second century, it seems that a quite serious food shortage occurred in 189 under the rule of Commodus. This is attested by both Cassius Dio and Herodian. Herodian reports how a plague struck Italy, and was particularly devastating in Rome. According to the author, the fact that the capital was overcrowded and yet still received more immigrants made the situation even worse. The plague was followed by a food crisis, and Herodian blames an imperial slave called Cleander for the problems. As Herodian claims, Cleander bought most of the corn supply and then cut off its distribution. Then, when a food crisis occurred, he would increase his own popularity by distributing corn in a generous manner.⁶⁴ Cassius Dio reports, as well, the “grievous” famine, which was made worse by the bad policies of the officials. Dio writes how the grain commissioner Papirius Dionysius increased the severity of the food crisis in order to make people hate Cleander.⁶⁵ *Historia Augusta* also describes the events as a famine, and mentions that the troubles did not occur because of a shortage of grain as such, but because of the bad policies of the officials.⁶⁶

According to contemporary writers, the protests following this particular food crisis were very fierce, and turned violent. The events began with a horse-race, where people expressed their disapproval about Cleander’s actions. Commodus had to flee and fighting between the mob and the Praetorian Guard broke out. Eventually the emperor became so frightened that he had Cleander executed.⁶⁷ It is rare to find reports about food riots where the emperor himself is threatened – the only comparable case from the imperial period seems to be the riot of 51, as reported by Tacitus. According to the historian, the people were furious because no food supplies were available in the city for fifteen days. As a result, the crowd rounded on emperor Claudius in the forum, and soldiers had to rescue him from the mob.⁶⁸

Even if the actual famine was eventually avoided in 189, reports indicate that people in the capital were in a very revolutionary mood only a couple of years before Severus’ rise to power. As a result, it is a possibility that people again feared problems with grain distribution when Severus marched into Rome in 193 and took

power by killing emperor Didius Julianus. After all, conflicts endangered the normal life of the capital, including food supply and grain distribution, and thus the civil war that broke out between Severus and Pescennius Niger meant that the supply routes from the provinces to the capital were threatened.

We have already noticed how much effort Severus put into his actions to secure North Africa and the trade routes. These acts are naturally related to the very real threat of civil disturbances in the capital should the supply route be in any danger. Moreover, Severus reminded people about his efforts by releasing plenty of coinage including the goddess Annona, the protector of grain distribution and a symbol of the imperial security of the food supply. Indeed, there may be even more numismatic evidence pointing to Severus’ efforts.

In the first years of the third century CE a series of coins were issued celebrating imperial generosity, *indulgentia*, towards Italy and Carthage.⁶⁹ There have been a number of theories among scholars concerning which acts of generosity these coins represented. It has been suggested, for example, that this imperial favour towards Italy could point to the war against brigands that Severus conducted during that time, or to the project to repair Italian roads.⁷⁰ Similarly, it is not exactly known why Severus issued coins celebrating his generosity towards Carthage, although it might be connected with the fact that he did give much attention to his home province in North Africa.⁷¹ Especially the city of Lepcis Magna received remarkable honours from the emperor.⁷²

However, while it is possible that the fight against the brigands in Italy, or goodwill towards the emperor’s old home in North Africa were behind the Severan coinage propagating *indulgentia* towards these two areas, it does not necessarily exclude other possible messages that Severus wanted to bring forward. One should especially note the significance of *indulgentia*. It embraced the concept of generosity but had a strongly paternalistic flavour. It underlined that the relationship between the one who showed *indulgentia* and the one who received it was highly hierarchic. The concept is explained very clearly especially in the letters exchanged between Pliny the Younger and Trajan (written in the early second century CE). The letters indicate that *indulgentia* did not deal first and foremost with concrete favours, such as gifts, but instead it referred to permissions, granted by the emperor to his subjects, to do something they wished to do; in other words, it included allowance by the emperor to his subjects.⁷³ Given the highly paternalistic significance of

63 Cameron 1976, 157-193; Garnsey 1988, 240-242.

64 Herodian 1.12.3-4.

65 Cassius Dio 73.13-14.

66 *Historia Augusta, Commodus* 14.1.

67 Cassius Dio 73.13.3-6.

68 Tacitus, *Annales* 12.43; see also Suetonius, *Claudius* 18.2.

69 *INDULGENTIA AVGG IN ITALIAM: BMC V 282* (dedicated to Septimius Severus) and *BMC V 339* (Caracalla); *INDULGENTIA AVGG IN CARTH.: 4.1*, nos. 193, 266-267, 759-760, 763 (Septimius Severus); 594 (Julia Domna); 415, 418a, 471 (Caracalla).

70 See *BMC (=Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum)*, cli (brigands); Hill 1969, 178 (roads).

71 Levick suggests (2007, 133) that the generosity here implies the grant of *ius Italicum* to Carthage.

72 For Severus’ activities in North Africa, see Birley 1999, 146-154.

73 For discussion, see Rantala 2013, 139.

indulgentia, it is possible that the coinage in this case also points to the hierarchic idea of imperial power, signifying that the emperor really was the master of Italy and North Africa (Carthage being one of the most important cities in the province of Africa). In other words, it indicated that the emperor had strict control not only in Italy (where the capital was situated and where Severus distributed grain to the people), but also in North Africa, one of the most important grain producers in the empire. As a result, this might have been another way to assure the people in Rome that food supplies were secure and in the firm hands of the emperor.

Conclusion

Historia Augusta, a problematic but nevertheless interesting source about the lives of Roman emperors, describes the Severan policy as follows:

*Rei frumentariae, quam minimam reppererat, ita consuluit, ut excedens vita septem annorum canonem populo Romano relinqueret.*⁷⁴

As the source states here, Severus was so successful in organizing the food supply that while there was a shortage of grain when he became emperor, there was a surplus to the amount of seven years tribute when he died. Another passage from the same biography states that, at the end of the reign of Septimius Severus, there was enough grain not only for the people of the capital, but also for the whole populace of Italy for five years.⁷⁵ The problem is, though, that Cassius Dio and Herodian, two much more trustworthy historians, do not mention any trouble with food shortages during the Severan period. According to Peter Garnsey, this was due to the low quality of their histories and their poor coverage of the civil war era.⁷⁶ While this might be true, there could be another explanation as well.

It is, in fact, possible that the food shortage was actually exaggerated by Septimius Severus himself. Severus' biography in the *Historia Augusta* probably made much use of the emperor's self-made biography. Considering this, the story of the emperor receiving a city with no food but which he saved through his wise policy could come from this very source – at least the tone of the passage would indicate this.⁷⁷ There is even some kind of analogy with Augustus, who had in his propaganda stated how he “founded Rome a city of bricks and left it a city of

⁷⁴ *Historia Augusta*, Severus 8.4.

⁷⁵ *Historia Augusta*, Severus 23.2.

⁷⁶ Garnsey 1988, p. 226.

⁷⁷ The biography of Septimius Severus is mentioned in Aurelius Victor, *Caesares*. 20; *Historia Augusta*, Severus 3.2; *Historia Augusta*, Clodius Albinus 7.1; Cassius Dio 76.7.3; Herodian 2.9.4.

marble⁷⁸ – both emperors received a city with shortcomings, but left it in perfect condition.

If the public were afraid of food shortages (which they probably were, taking the problems with grain distribution in 189 as well as the civil war in the early 190s into consideration), Severus the usurper could legitimize his power more easily by presenting himself as a man who had the ability to secure the adequate distribution of food. Whether there really was a food shortage or not, we cannot know for sure; however, it is important to note that the internal crisis that usually meant at least a great fear of famine among the people of Rome, gave Severus an opportunity to show himself as a “saviour”. As we saw, wars were indeed one of the major causes for food shortages and famine in the Roman world, and the city of Rome (and the whole of Italy) was especially dependent on grain transportation from the provinces. The citizens of the capital knew this very well.⁷⁹

If we evaluate the reign of Septimius Severus against this background, it is interesting that Annona appears to have a more prominent position in Severan iconography precisely during those occasions when Severus was out of the capital – especially in the first years of his reign. This would perhaps indicate that the emperor wanted to highlight a deity associated with grain supply and the ability of imperial power to secure it while he was away. It reminded people that even if the ruler was absent, he was fighting to secure trade routes from Africa to the capital, with a little help from divine forces. However, when Severus returned to the capital, first in 202 to celebrate his tenth year in power, and then for a longer period in 204–207, Tellus was given more attention. This seems logical enough: Tellus was an ancient fertility deity who was also associated with an age of plenty and abundance – a Golden Age. As a result, she was a perfect companion for the emperor who was now present in the capital celebrating his ten years in power and organizing Secular Games to declare that a new Golden Age had begun. This indicated that Severus himself was displayed as a man who had brought peace and prosperity to Rome. On the other hand, Ceres, another prominent cultivation deity, appears to be used in Severan propaganda especially to highlight the role of the empress Julia Domna. Connecting the goddess not only with the traditional themes of fertility and such, but also with motherhood, strengthened the dynastic aspirations of the Severan family.

Later, in 206–207, new issues concerning coins depicting Annona appeared again. Based on the use of Annona (and Tellus) in the earlier Severan iconography, it is possible that this prepared people for the fact that Severus would leave the capital again. As the man who had secured grain for the city was leaving, Annona reminded people that imperial rule still worked and took care of food distribution.

⁷⁸ Suetonius, *Augustus* 28.3.

⁷⁹ Tacitus, for example, strongly criticized the situation in which the empire had put itself, as he wrote how Italy used to export grain to distant countries, but was by his time, cultivating the fields of Africa and Egypt instead, and was dependent on the uncertainty of maritime transportation; Tacitus, *Annales* 12.43.

In 208 Severus left to conduct a military campaign in Britain – but never returned. Overall, the roles of the deities of food, agriculture and distribution in Severan policy seem to be closely connected with the acts of the emperor himself. The ruler was thus presented as a man who represented divine power on earth and even co-operated with the gods.

The reign of Septimius Severus appears to witness the creation of a new kind of relationship between the emperor and his subjects. The person of the emperor was highlighted, perhaps even more strongly than before, as an essential part of the people's welfare. This goal was achieved by various means. The most concrete mark of the emperor's goodwill, the distribution of daily food rations, was improved by the addition of oil to the provisions, and Tellus, goddess of fertility, received an important part in Severan propaganda, especially during the time the emperor was himself in the capital and putting on magnificent public spectacles. In addition, the continuous appearance of Annona on Roman coinage while Severus was not residing in the city of Rome seems to indicate that coinage was indeed used actively for imperial purposes. Whether the iconography was decided by the emperor himself or by some of his officials, at least Severan images of Annona seem to indicate that coinage closely followed the emperor's preferences and actions, and was consciously used to strengthen the desired image of an emperor.

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