

Edward ZARROW Caesar, Servius, and Elephants

Few individuals in antiquity have been shrouded by such a monstrous halo of intrigue as C. Julius Caesar, and it would seem at a glance that the works of Alföldi, Weinstock, and recently Meier have left albeit few Caesarian stones unturned. Scholastic debate yet remains concerning the meaning, significance, and ideological function of Caesar's cognomen, one associated etymologically with the Latin *caedo* referring to the aspect of his birth by the "Caesarian" method and *caesius* to the blue-gray color of his eyes. Few modern scholars have taken note of two ancient sources which add a third and most probable dimension to this cognominal enigma: a passage from the Byzantine John the Lydian (*De mens.* 4.102) and an excerpt from the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* (*Ael.* 2.3) both of which confirm *caesa* to be a Semitic equivalent of elephant. However, this connection also exists within a Punic inscription (*Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* 336) and is preserved in the work of Servius' *In Aeneidos Commentarius* (1.286), a passage which has escaped the notice of Yavetz, Weinstock, Gelzer, and even the great Münzer in all of their broad Caesarian political biographies and monographs. With this presentation, it is my primary goal to reveal the impact of this latent Servian annotation, to expose that a vast majority of modern scholarship has refused outright to consider seriously this etymological aspect even when confronted with ancient literary and epigraphic sources, and to demonstrate that even Caesar possessed such knowledge and thus brilliantly wielded the imagery of his magical, elephantine name in conjunction with the materializations of the civil war, particularly upon his coins.

Servius provides this derivational insight regarding the terminology of *Ilus*, his inextricable link with Caesar's *gens Julia*, and the derivation of Caesar's *nomina*. He indicates elsewhere in his commentaries that Caesar was interested in both the morphological and programmatic interconnections of his name with specific divinities, implicitly suggesting the possibility that Caesar himself may not only have endeavored to accrue information concerning such nominal idiosyncrasies but took great pains to do so (Serv. *Aen.* 10.316; also H. Strasburger, *Caesars Eintritt in die Geschichte* [Munich 1938] 30-35, 78f.) Given these considerations, it is thus incomprehensible that such historians as J.P.V.D Balsdon who were familiar with Servius would purport "...alas, that no word ever existed, either in Semitic or Berber, which bore the slightest resemblance to 'Caesar'" (*Julius Caesar: A Political Biography* [New York 1967] 3).

In comparison to many other animals which figure into the numismatic corpus of the Roman republic, the elephant seems to occupy a position of venerable estimation. For this reason, the numismatists Michael Crawford (*Roman Republican Coinage* [Cambridge 1974]) and more recently Sir David Sear (*The History and Coinage of the Roman Emperors 49-27BC* [London 1998]) have interpreted the iconography of Caesar's incipient military issues of BC 49, upon which an elephant tramples a serpent above Caesar's unabridged cognomen, to represent most plausibly the triumph of "good over evil." This is a gross oversimplification brought to bear by both Judeo-Christian ophiophobic biases and the apparent lack of a plausible ideological or semantic alternative; however, Caesar's utilization of the elephant in this instance serves not only

the purpose of calculated sociopolitical propaganda but also that of numismatic paronomasia in the tradition of his republican forebears. Just as the moneyer Pansa struck images of Pan, Sabinus, the Sabines, and Musa, the Muses, it stands to reason that Caesar's coins could foster that of *caesa*, ones temporally and ideologically detached from the subsequent Gallic victory series with which the coin type is most often mistakenly associated without the benefit of the Servian reference.

Thus, the exposure of Servius' definition of Caesar's name to mean "elephant" ought compel scholars to perhaps reconsider the methods of critical inquiry that have enabled us to reach our present conclusions concerning the interpretation of such iconography, if not the very *genius* of the man which influenced and permeated all aspects of late Republican society.