

# Gallienus the Genderbender

L. S. B. MacCoull

AT SOME TIME between A.D. 260 and 268 the emperor Gallienus did an unprecedented and unparalleled thing. He had himself represented on his coins with the feminine-gender<sup>1</sup> Latin legend GALLIENA AVGVSTA.<sup>2</sup> The emperor's head on the obverse (features and hair) is represented in what is described as a feminized (though bearded) form with unusual attributes.<sup>3</sup> Though scholars since the Renaissance have variously attempted to account for this unique occurrence, recent post-modern work on gender and its construction, including cross-dressing and androgyny, has not been brought to bear on it. Nor have archaeological discoveries of the last thirty years been taken into account. In the present paper I should like to suggest a rationale for this astonishing propaganda gesture by a reigning emperor during the troubled third century.

<sup>1</sup>J. P. C. Kent has tried to dismiss the entire problem as a non-issue by claiming that the legend is not in the feminine gender but is rather a "hyper-corrected" masculine singular vocative, with AE written for E: "Gallienae Augustae," *NC* VII 13 (1973) 64–68. I am not convinced, not least because no known coin of Gallienus in fact uses the vocative (as pointed out by the anonymous reader for *GRBS*, to whom I am grateful). Such shifting grammatical endings are in any case to be found in Latin literature as early as Catullus; but on a coin surely more accuracy would be striven for to reach a large public audience. Kent's theory has been in essence followed by L. O. Lagerqvist, "Gallienae Augustae Once Again," in *Florilegium Numismaticum ... W. Westermarck* (Stockholm 1992) 219–231, except at 219 where he calls the form in -AE a genitive; at 223–225 he summarizes Kent's arguments (I thank Kent Rigsby for a photocopy of Lagerqvist's article).

<sup>2</sup>*RIC* V.1 Gallienus nos. 74, 82, 87, 128, 359–360: the legend is formulated in what I continue to read as the dative, GALLIENAE AVGVSTAE.

<sup>3</sup>*RIC* uses the description "crowned with reeds." See below. Also *cf.* Kent (*supra* n.1) 65, 67–68; Lagerqvist (*supra* n.1) 225.

Over seventy years ago András Alföldi<sup>4</sup> suggested a solution: that the emperor, who was reported by one source to have been initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries during a visit to Athens, was representing himself as an amalgam of the Eleusinian goddesses Demeter and Kore. By this gesture, according to Alföldi, he was endeavoring to propose an alternative to the empire's growing Christian movement, one more suited to the philosophical temper.<sup>5</sup> This solution to the question who "Galliena Augusta" may have been or may have represented was at first widely accepted and then modified.<sup>6</sup> However, no other explanation has ever found general support.

Was the male emperor in fact involved here? Could there have been a female historical person with the name and title Galliena Augusta?<sup>7</sup> That strange work the *Historia Augusta* names a "Galliena" as a female cousin of the emperor Gallienus, who, it is related, murdered the North African usurper Celsus presumably out of loyalty to her relative.<sup>8</sup> Obviously as far as Gallienus and matters related to him are concerned, this biased, largely invented, much later fabrication<sup>9</sup> is not a source in which one can

<sup>4</sup>"Zur Kenntnis der Zeit der römischen Soldatenkaiser: II. Das Problem des verweiblichten Kaisers Gallienus, 2. Die 'Galliena Augusta' der Münzen," originally published in *ZfN* 38 (1928: = *Studien zur Geschichte der Weltkrise des dritten Jahrhunderts n.Chr.* [Darmstadt 1967] 31–52). I thank Frank Campbell for a photocopy.

<sup>5</sup>For summary and discussion of the views of Alföldi (and others), see L. de Blois, *The Policy of the Emperor Gallienus* (Leiden 1976: hereafter DE BLOIS) 151–155, 186–190, cf. 126.

<sup>6</sup>De Blois 153–154, 186–187; cf. J. Gagé, "Italicité et hellénisme autour de Gallien et Salonine," *ANRW* II.2 (Berlin/New York 1975) 830.

<sup>7</sup>I pass over the possibility that Valerian's wife, Gallienus' mother, who was probably named Egnatia Galliena, might have been intended.

<sup>8</sup>*HA Tyr. Trig.* 29.3; cf. R. Syme, *Emperors and Biography: Studies in the Historia Augusta* (Oxford 1971) 270. "Galliena" is even listed in *PIR*<sup>2</sup> L 266, but is not to be found in *PLRE* I.

<sup>9</sup>See the useful and informative excursus in E. J. Kenney, ed., *Cambridge History of Classical Literature* II (Cambridge 1982) 918–919.

put much trust.<sup>10</sup> The brief *HA* story of Celsus and his murder<sup>11</sup> betrays its origins and its ideological bias. It is set at a time when the empire is supposedly being torn apart by the break-away rulers Postumus in Gaul and Odaenathus in the east, among others. The North African proconsul and general dub a burly man named Celsus emperor, *peplo deae caelestis ornatum*,<sup>12</sup> by dressing him up in a Great Goddess outfit. How appropriate that this usurping cross-dresser should be then said to be killed by a vengeful “Galliena,” then thrown to the dogs, with what was left being *in crucem sublata* (29.4), an anti-Christian jibe similar to the famous graffito of the man worshipping a crucified donkey. To the Gallienus-hating author(s) of the *HA*, such a “Galliena” was clearly more of a man than the actual emperor. This mythical Charlotte Corday (in whose existence Gibbon nonetheless had believed) never received a coin commemoration, let alone one depicting her as a (however virile) “bearded lady.” We must return to the actual emperor Gallienus of history.

In his monograph of 1976 Lukas de Blois did allude in passing to what will be seen to be the most sensible solution: not Demeter/Kore or even Artemis (137), but Allat, the goddess of Palmyra.<sup>13</sup> Under the heading “Gallienus as Minerva?” de Blois wrote (157): “It is possible that Gallienus identified himself with the goddess [Minerva] as a result of the Palmyrene victories against the Persians in 260–264 ... Minerva may have been an *interpretatio Romana* of Al-Lath, an Arab goddess

<sup>10</sup>Cf. R. Syme, *Historia Augusta Papers* (Oxford 1983) 152, on how the *HA* perpetrates anti-Gallienus propaganda not only to be pro-senatorial (and, in the fourth century, archaizing) but also to promote the Constantinian dynasty by praising their ancestors (*i.e.* Claudius) and denigrating those ancestors’ opponents.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. D. Kienast, *Römische Kaisertabelle*<sup>2</sup> (Darmstadt 1996) 230 (“Alle Angaben sind offenbar fiktiv”).

<sup>12</sup>*HA Tyr. Trig.* 29.1, reading lower-case *c*: this is clearly the Great-Mother-type goddess in her North African form.

<sup>13</sup>In general see H. J. W. Drijvers, *The Religion of Palmyra* (Leiden 1976) 19–20 with Plates LV–LIX, and J. Teixidor, *The Pantheon of Palmyra* (Leiden 1979) 53–64, *cf.* 17, 76, with index p.122, and Plates XVII–XVIII.

whose name is worked into that of Vaballathus."<sup>14</sup> How right he was. In that same year of 1976 Han J. W. Drijvers published a report on the 1974 and 1975 excavation seasons at Palmyra that explored the sanctuary of the goddess Allat, which remained in use for worship until the late fourth century.<sup>15</sup> It was discovered that Allat was indeed represented in her sanctuary by a borrowed statue of Athena.<sup>16</sup> In visually representing himself as assimilated to Allat of Palmyra, Gallienus was publicly expressing gratitude to the Palmyrene ruler Odaenathus, named *corrector totius Orientis*,<sup>17</sup> for his saving and timely victories over the Persian enemy in Mesopotamia.<sup>18</sup>

The goddess Allat performed numerous functions for her

<sup>14</sup>Wahballat, the name of Odaenathus and Zenobia's son born *ca* A.D. 256, does indeed mean "Gift of Allat": "or in Greek, Athenodorus," R. Stoneman, *Palmyra and its Empire* (London 1992) 114. In keeping with Semitic naming patterns, the child was probably named after his grandfather, Odaenathus' father, who seems also to have been named Wahballat (Stoneman 116).

<sup>15</sup>"Das Heiligtum der arabischen Göttin Allât im westlichen Stadtteil von Palmyra," *AntW* 7 (1976) 28–38.

<sup>16</sup>Drijvers (*supra* n.15) 34 with Abb. 7b.

<sup>17</sup>See D. S. Potter, "Palmyra and Rome: Odaenathus' Titulature and the Use of the Imperium Maius," *ZPE* 113 (1996) 271–285, esp. 272–273 on this title, and 281–284 on reciprocal Roman-Syrian ways of displaying authority. See also A. Watson, *Aurelian and the Third Century* (London/New York 1999) 29–32, and W. Ball, *Rome in the East* (London/New York 2000) 77. P. G. Sayre sees in Odaenathus' status a precursor of those of Theodoric and of the Ghassanid phylarchs Mundhir and Nu'man (for whom see I. Shahîd, *Rome and the Arabs* [Washington 1984] 22–24, 3–40 [with 39 n.24 on parallelism between Odaenathus and Mundhir], and *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* [Washington 1996] I.1 399–406, 437–439 [on parallels to Odaenathus], 505–507; I.2 841–842, 861–864): "Odenathus of Palmyra, Theodoric, and the Ghassanid Phylarchs—Late Roman Client-Kings?" *25th Byzantine Studies Conference Abstracts* (College Park, Md., 1999) 93–94.

<sup>18</sup>J. P. Eadie, "The Transformation of the Eastern Frontier, 260–305," in R. W. Mathisen and H. S. Sivan, edd., *Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity* (Aldershot 1996) 72–82, esp. 72–73; cf. T. D. Barnes, *The Sources of the Historia Augusta* (Brussels 1978) 73, for a date of A.D. 265 for Odaenathus' taking of Ctesiphon. Kent (*supra* n.1: 67–68) dates the coin series to 266 or after, and the victory celebrated as having been on the Euphrates. Lagerqvist (*supra* n.1) 225 remarks that "the remarkable 'crown' [perhaps of water plants] might refer to the location of the victory near a river." But see also L. de Blois, "Odaenathus and the Roman-Persian War of 252–264 A.D.," *TALANTA* 6 (1975) 7–23.

worshippers in the Palmyrene region.<sup>19</sup> Besides witnessing documents of sale and ownership (Trombley 175), she cursed those breaking contracts and destroying inscriptions (178–179, 181), and was regarded as the giver of peace (175–177, *cf.* 195) and protector from malignity whether from the forces of nature or from human enemies, especially in a world of blood vengeance (177–181) where clan loyalty and solidarity were paramount values. In this context she protected the rights of asylum and of vengeance (180–181, *cf.* 183, 195), and safeguarded the booty of the raider. We may note that the reverses of Gallienus' GALLIENAE AVGVSTAE coins represent either Peace (*RIC* nos. 74, 359–360: VBIQVE PAX) or Victory, either in a chariot (part of the Peace image) or crowning the emperor (nos. 82, 87, 128: VICTORIA AVG).<sup>20</sup> What we have here is Roman imperial propaganda appropriating the symbolic language of the Syrian world,<sup>21</sup> specifically Allat the giver of peace and victory to Odaenathus son of “Gift-of-Allat” and by extension to Gallienus. The Palmyrene ruler’s loyalty to Rome is likewise advertised and embodied in this image, a loyalty protected by Allat who punishes oathbreakers.

Allat was a goddess who could be understood in wide-ranging syncretistic ways.<sup>22</sup> In addition to what a Greek or Roman would denominate as “Athena/Minerva,” her persona blurred edges with other deities including both the Tyche of Palmyra<sup>23</sup> and the all-embracing Dea Syria in her various forms and under

<sup>19</sup>For what follows see F. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization c. 370–529* II (Leiden 1994) 174–183.

<sup>20</sup>Alföldi (*supra* n.4) 33–34, *cf.* 40.

<sup>21</sup>*Cf.* Potter (*supra* n.17) 271, 284–285; Watson (*supra* n.17) 66.

<sup>22</sup>“Allat’s identity and character is rendered in such a way, that she is recognizable for adherents to other cults and people from other regions”: H. J. W. Drijvers, “Afterlife and Funerary Symbolism in Palmyrene Religion,” in U. Bianchi and M. J. Vermaseren, edd., *La soteriologia dei culti orientali nell’ impero romano* (Leiden 1982) 715.

<sup>23</sup>H. J. W. Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa* (Leiden 1980) 107: again the warrior who saves humanity from chaos and brings peace, as on the coin reverses discussed above.

her various names.<sup>24</sup> We may remember that over seventy years ago Alföldi made his Demeter/Kore identification<sup>25</sup> largely on the basis of what he perceived as the “Kornähre” crown on the head of the “feminized” Gallienus.<sup>26</sup> Atargatis/Allat too can be depicted crowned with ears of grain.<sup>27</sup> In view of what we now know thanks to archaeological evidence, surely Allat is the deity being called to mind by Gallienus’ coin obverses as well.<sup>28</sup>

Why, then, the “bearded lady”?<sup>29</sup> As David Potter has written, “As imperial coins were taken to be representations of the emperor’s power, it was also natural that people should think that abnormalities appearing on those coins reflected the particular interests of an emperor.”<sup>30</sup> In more than one locality, we note, the gender of Allat could be unclear.<sup>31</sup> In assimilating to the twy-gendered Allat, Gallienus was placing himself astride a shifting boundary that was seen as fluid and not necessarily determined, the better to embody his being in contact with the supernatural force that had helped bring victory and peace to the endangered East. The provisional nature of the bisexual body has been seen to refer both to divination and to notions of resurrection.<sup>32</sup> The Roman viewer of the coin image of Galliena Augusta a.k.a. Palmyrene Allat could recognize an overt

<sup>24</sup>Drijvers (*supra* n.23) 114–115, further associating the Atargatis figure with Nike and Tyche; cf. Teixidor (*supra* n.13) 58–62.

<sup>25</sup>Accepted by R. Delbrück, *Die Münzbildnisse von Maximinus bis Carinus* (Berlin 1940) 48.

<sup>26</sup>Alföldi (*supra* n.4) 34, 38, 43–44; however, cf. also Lagerqvist (*supra* n.1) 225.

<sup>27</sup>H. J. W. Drijvers, “De matre inter leones sedente: Iconography and Character of the Arab Goddess Allât,” in *Hommages à Maarten J. Vermaseren I* (Leiden 1978) 331–351 with Plates LXIII–LXXV, here esp. 346; cf. N. Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins* (New York 1965) 49 Plate 25.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Ball (*supra* n.17) 87 on Allat/Athena.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Watson (*supra* n.17) 85 (on the bias of the sources).

<sup>30</sup>*Prophets and Emperors* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1994) 124.

<sup>31</sup>S. B. Downey, *Excavations at Dura-Europos: The Stone and Plaster Sculpture* (Los Angeles 1977) 181–184, esp. 183.

<sup>32</sup>A conclusion drawn from very different material by L. Brisson, “Aspects politiques de la bisexualité,” in *Hommages* (*supra* n.27) 80–122.

message (while perhaps standing aside from it) and/or discern a deeper conceptual level.<sup>33</sup> Gallienus recognized that Odaenathus had saved Syria for Roman rule under the protection of Allat *biformis* who safeguarded federate loyalty and punished enemies. In the GALLIENAE AVGVSTAE coin group he was both thanking Odaenathus of Palmyra and auguring the resurgence of Roman rule. We are now in a better position to read and decode his public, visual numismatic statement (possibly now datable to A.D. 265 or 266) than were the scholars of two generations ago.<sup>34</sup>

*February, 2001*

Arizona Center for Medieval  
and Renaissance Studies  
Arizona State University  
Tempe, Arizona 85281  
haflele@imap4.asu.edu

<sup>33</sup>Cf. J. J. Pollitt, review of J. Eisner, *Art and the Roman Viewer* (Cambridge 1995), *JHS* 117 (1997) 265.

<sup>34</sup>This study was conceived in 1997 in commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary of the ANS Summer Fellows of 1967 (including my colleagues Sarah Pomeroy, Thomas Drew-Bear, and Richard Bulliet), as one of whom I was interested in Gallienus and his unusual coinage, asking questions that could not be answered with the material available then. Special thanks to Frank Campbell, ANS Librarian and a friend for these thirty-plus years, for photocopies and good humor; also to Kent Rigsby (*Ecclesiasticus* 6:14–15); and in loving memory of my companion of 1967–1971, Maxwell Vos K.S. (1927–1997).