

PRINCE of Youth

PHOTOS: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS (PAINTING) & GETTY IMAGES/VICGMYR

THIS PAINTING by French artist Jacques Pajou depicts Geta's mother trying to protect her younger son, who faces assassination by order of his brother, Caracalla.

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THE RISE & FALL OF ROMAN EMPEROR
PUBLIUS SEPTIMIUS GETA

THE STORY OF the rise and fall of Roman Emperor Publius Septimius Geta (r. A.D. 198–211) encompasses universal themes that define our common humanity as well as our potential for inhumanity: fatherly indulgence, motherly protection, sibling rivalry, betrayal, fratricide, and inconsolable grief. Although ancient, it is reminiscent of a Shakespearean tragedy wherein a flawed, high-ranking protagonist encounters a reversal of fortune and dies at the end of the play. Coins struck contemporaneously with Geta's reign augment the story as told by ancient authors, and a variety in bronze and silver serve to illustrate it here.

Born Lucius Septimius Geta on March 7, 189, from 203 onward, his praenomen changed from Lucius to Publius. Thus, Geta's names honor his father, Emperor Lucius Septimius Severus (r. 193–211), and his paternal grandfather, Publius Septimius Geta (born c. 110–died c. 171). Geta was the youngest of two sons born to Severus and his wife, Julia Domna (r. 193–217). His older brother Antoninus (born 188) is known today as Emperor Caracalla (r. 196–217). Geta is thought to have been born in Rome or Mediolanum (present-day Milan) and Caracalla in Lugdunum (present-day Lyon). Yet their Punic father, Severus, hailed from Leptis Magna in North Africa. Their mother, Julia, was a Syrian high priestess of royal birth. The boys' mixed heritage attests to the mobility and cosmopolitan makeup of the vast Roman Empire during the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries A.D.

Geta's tale is bound inextricably with that of his father, who burned with ambition to establish a lasting and viable imperial dynasty. It is also intertwined with the rise of Caracalla, who, as Severus's eldest son, was the primary heir to the throne. Unfortunately, Severus's love for his sons, his quest for personal glory, his desire for lasting familial fame, and his occult beliefs combined to create a noxious brew. This led him to disastrously misjudge his sons' capacity to corule the empire effectively and harmoniously.

Destined to Rule

Geta's elevation to the imperial throne occurred in the aftermath of the civil war that raged from A.D. 193 to 197. As governor of Pannonia Superior, his father, Septimius Severus, had been proclaimed emperor by the local legions. Severus used his cunning and superior military strength to defeat various rivals, ultimately becoming the uncontested ruler of Rome. Seeking to establish a dynasty as a means to consolidate power, in 196 Severus named his 8-year-old son Caracalla as Caesar, next in line to the throne. Then, in 198, he promoted Caracalla to the rank of Augustus,

making him coruler; to 9-year-old Geta, he bestowed the title of Caesar. Severus issued a brief series of dynastic coins to mark the occasion, each bearing family portraits intended to represent *aeternitas imperii* (“an eternity of Roman rule”) (Figure 1).

Both brothers were celebrated on numerous coin types, presenting them as their father’s inevitable successors, dutiful priests, and bringers of good fortune. On coins bearing the legend *PRINCEPS IVVENTVTIS* or abbrevi-



ations thereof, the boys appear as “first among the young” or “prince of youth,” honorifics reserved for designated heirs to the throne. A coin type unique to Geta shows three companions astride galloping horses, with Geta apparently leading (Figure 2).

Divine associations assured dynastic continuity consecrated by the gods. The brothers’ similarity in appearance encouraged their identification with the mythical Dioscuri, twin protectors of Rome. On a provincial coin from Thracian Hadrianopolis, Geta is crowned by an eagle, the sacred symbol of Jupiter (Figure 3). The young prince’s right to legitimate rule is thus conferred directly by the king of heaven, Earth, justice, and all the Olympian gods.

► **CASTOR AND POLLUX** are known in Roman mythology as the semi-divine Dioscuri. They were twin half-brothers whose mother, Leda, was seduced by Jupiter after he took the form of a swan.



FIGURE 1: Julia Domna, Rome, silver denarius (A.D. 198-209). Obverse: *IVLIA AVGVSTA*; bust right, draped. Reverse: *AETERNIT IMPERI*; laureate, undraped bust of Caracalla facing bare-headed, undraped bust of Geta. A dynastic issue depicting Caracalla as Augustus and Geta as Caesar. Actual Size: 19mm



FIGURE 3: Geta, Thrace, Hadrianopolis (A.D. 198-209, bronze). Obverse: *P CET C GETAC K*; bare-headed bust right, draped and cuirassed. Reverse: *AAPIA* around, *NOIIOAIT / ON* in exergue; Geta holding spear and vessel over altar; to left a large eagle standing right, crowning Geta with a wreath. Very rare—this coin is perhaps the second known example. Actual Size: 26mm



FIGURE 2: Geta, Rome, silver denarius (A.D. 202-09). Obverse: *P SEPT GETA CAES PONT*; bare-headed bust right, draped. Reverse: *PRINC IVVENT* around, *COS* in exergue; Severus, Caracalla, and Geta galloping right (or Geta and two knights); leader turns his head back and extends right hand in gesture of encouragement. Actual Size: 19mm



FIGURE 4: Julia Domna, Galatia, Tavium (A.D. 197-8, bronze). Obverse: *IOYAI AOMNA CCBACTH*; bust right, draped. Reverse: *CIC CONA TOYC KYP-IOC / TAOYIA*; Septimius Severus, radiate, standing center, clasping his right hand with Caracalla’s; at right, Geta facing left, holding patera and scroll. Possibly unique—this coin is the only one known for Domna with this reverse type. Actual Size: 26mm

PHOTOS: MICHAEL A. KODYSZ (COINS), ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (DIOSCURI) & GETTY IMAGES/NAPHTALINA

SEVERUS, CARACALLA, AND GETA presided over sacrifices held before and after military expeditions, at which a bull was led to the altar in a solemn procession followed by a long column of soldiers.

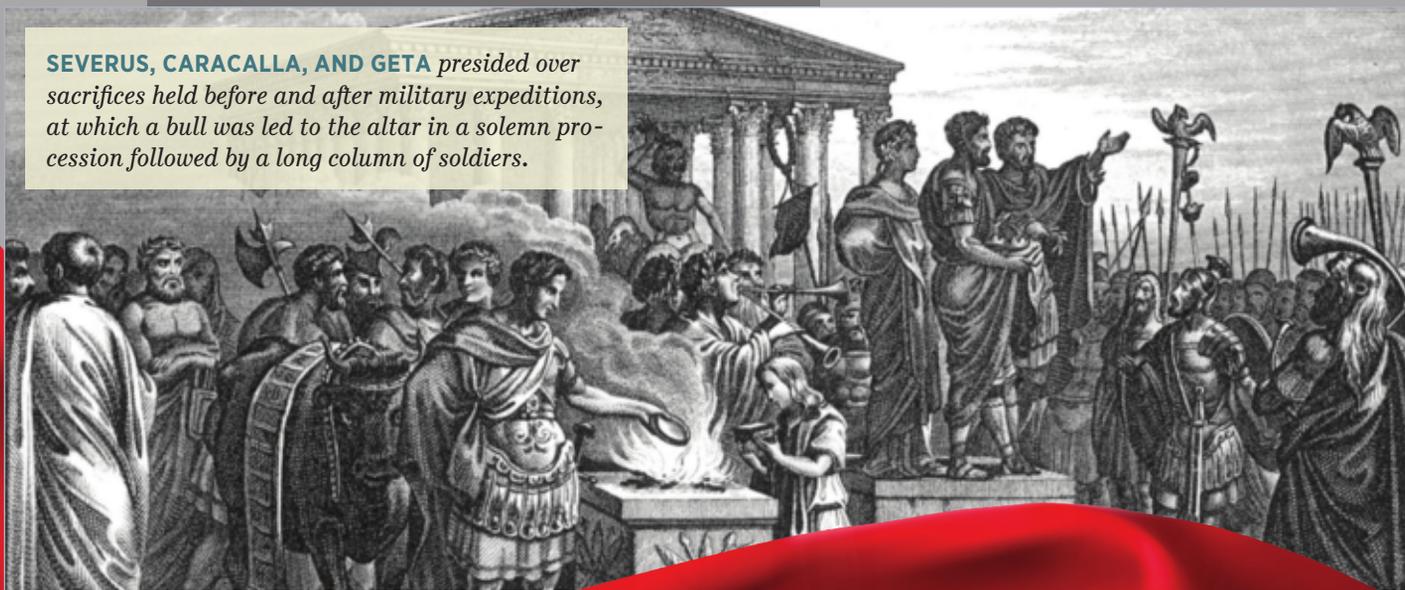


FIGURE 5: *Septimius Severus, Moesia Inferior, Nicopolis ad Istrum (c. A.D. 209, bronze). Obverse: ΑΥΤ Λ ΣΕΠΤΙ ΣΕΥΗΡΟΣ Π; laureate head right. Reverse: ΥΠ ΦΛ ΟΥΛΠΙΑΝ ΝΙΚΟΠΟΛΙΤ / ΠΡΟΣ Ι in exergue; Caracalla and Geta standing left and right, face to face, and clasping hands. Actual Size: 28mm*



FIGURE 6: *Geta, Rome, bronze as (A.D. 203-8). Obverse: P SEPTIMIUS GETA CAES; bare-headed bust right, draped and cuirassed. Reverse: CONCORDIA MILIT / S | C; Concordia standing left between six standards and holding long scepter. Actual Size: 27mm*

Brotherly Discord

Coinage issued during the reign of Septimius Severus often promotes harmony between Caracalla and Geta, their family, and the military. A prime example is a unique coin of Julia Domna from Tavium, Galatia, which celebrates the return of peace and stability to the empire after the civil war of A.D. 193-97. It shows Severus, Caracalla, and Geta below the legend ΕΙΣ ΕΩΝΑ ΤΟΥΣ ΚΥΡΙΟΥΣ, which praises them as “eternal rulers” (Figure 4).

The idea of familial and military concord was important to advancing the public perception of dynastic stability and confidence in the perpetuation of Severan rule. Numerous coin types thus depict the two heirs facing each other and clasping hands in agreement (Figure 5). Sometimes, the brothers are shown performing sacrificial rites together or with military imagery.

During a period of peace from 203 to 207, the boys developed an intense sibling rivalry fueled by their luxurious lifestyle in the imperial palace. The brothers also became in-

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creasingly indolent, carousing with charioteers and engaging in all sorts of petty crimes and abuses. Pleas from their mother, Julia, fell on deaf ears. Finally, in 208 Severus compelled them to accompany him on a military expedition to the remote island of Britannia, far removed from the debaucheries of Rome. In doing so, Severus hoped that the responsibilities of administration and command, along with the rigors of military discipline and the deprivations of camp life, would force his sons to cooperate. An *as* coin of Geta issued contemporaneously with these events shows Concordia, the personification of harmony, standing among six legionary standards; it may have been issued to soldiers to evoke feelings of personal loyalty (Figure 6).

► **ON THIS** *masterful engraving (c. A.D. 198-200), Septimius Severus and his wife, Julia Domna, face right. Their youthful sons, Caracalla and Geta, face left. As the youngest son, Geta is shown partially obscured in the shadow of his brother.*



SEVERUS, Julia Domna, and Geta made the sea crossing to Britannia in early A.D. 208; Caracalla probably arrived in 207. Aside from his goal of military conquest over unruly Scottish tribes, Severus intended to use the war to transform his sons into tough and able dynastic successors. In 209 Geta was elevated to co-Augustus, and in 210 the Severans declared victory.

With a premonition of his impending death as foretold to him by a seer, Severus also hoped to achieve a psychological victory over his sons that would put an end to their rivalry. The infirm Severus died at Eboracum (present-day York) on February 4, 211. On his deathbed, Severus advised his sons to “be harmonious, enrich the soldiers, and scorn all other men.” Caracalla and Geta were thus proclaimed coemperors, but Caracalla seized absolute power for himself, leaving Geta to rule in name only.



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Several coin types record the family’s return trip to Rome. One of these bears an image of Fortuna Redux, who ensured the emperors’ safe travels (Figure 7). Even before their arrival, the brothers pretended to love each other but were opposites in every respect. In Rome their mutual distrust grew as they cultivated rival political factions. They divided the imperial palace in half, each keeping to his own side, and there was talk of splitting the empire between them. The brothers’ differences were manifest even on coinage, as each chose his own imagery. One example is a type unique to Geta featuring Janus, god of new beginnings, perhaps invoked to ease the tran-



FIGURE 7: *Geta, Rome, bronze sestertius (A.D. 211). Obverse: P SEPTIMIVS GETA PIVS AVG BRIT; laureate head right with light drapery on left shoulder. Reverse: FORT RED TR P III COS II P P / S C in exergue; Fortuna, draped, seated left on throne, holding rudder on globe in right hand and cornucopia in left; under throne, wheel.*

Actual Size: 33mm



FIGURE 8: *Geta, Rome, silver denarius (A.D. 211). Obverse: P SEPT GETA PIVS AVG BRIT; laureate head right. Reverse: TR P III COS II P P; Janus standing front, holding reversed spear and thunderbolt. Janus presided over transitions, passages, beginnings, and endings. Actual Size: 19mm*

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Where Were They Minted?

DOZENS OF provincial mints were active during the Severan era. This map identifies the locations of a select few.



A MAP OF MAJOR MINT LOCATIONS FOR COINS OF GETA, A.D. 197–212.

- Imperial Mint
- Provincial Mint
- Imperial & Provincial Mint

Source: Stier, Hans-Erich. 1985. *Westermann großer Atlas zur Weltgeschichte*. Braunschweig: Westermann.

FIGURE 9: Geta (as Caesar), Phrygia, Amorium (A.D. 198–209, bronze). Obverse: Π CΕΠ ΓΕΤΑC ΚΑΙCΑΡ; boy’s bare-headed and draped bust right. Reverse: ΑΜΟΡΙΑΝΩΝ CΙΒΙ Γ ΝΟΥ / ΑΡΧ in exergue; Zeus seated left, holding thunderbolt and scepter.

FIGURE 10: Geta (as Caesar), Mysia, Hadrianothera (A.D. 198–209, bronze). Obverse: Α CΕΠΤΙ ΓΕΤΑC ΚΑΙ; youth’s bare-headed, draped, and cuirassed bust right. Reverse: ΑΔΡΙΑΝΟΘΗΡΩΝ ΘΗΡΩΝ in exergue; Zeus seated left, holding patera and long scepter. Possibly unique—this type is unlisted.

FIGURE 11: Geta (as Augustus), Illyria, Corcyra (A.D. 209–12, bronze). Obverse: Π CΕΠΤΙΜΙΟC ΓΕΤΑC CΥC ΑΥΓ ΒΡΗΤ; man’s laureate head right, bearded. Reverse: ΚΟΡΚΥΡΑΙΩΝ in exergue; Pegasus flying right. Very rare—this coin is perhaps the fourth known example.



sition from the firm rule of Severus to the harmonious corule of his sons (Figure 8). But Caracalla did not share this sentiment, and the situation became intolerable.

Honoring Geta on Provincial Portraiture

The coins of Geta form a remarkable sequence of portraiture showing a clear progression from smooth-cheeked, innocent boy (Figure 9) to ungainly adolescent (Figure 10) to fully bearded, careworn man (Figure 11). The numismatic output of the mostly Greek-speaking East is particularly interesting and varied. Eastern portraits from the Severan era (A.D. 193–235) generally adhere to the Hellenistic style, which sought to capture the true-to-life individualism of their



FIGURE 12: Geta, Rome, bronze as (A.D. 203-08). Obverse: P SEPTIMIVS GETA CAES; bare-headed bust right, draped and cuirassed. Reverse: PONTIF COS around and S C in exergue; Minerva seated left, holding owl and resting left elbow on shield; transverse spear or scepter under arm. Possibly unique variant. Actual Size: 28mm



FIGURE 15: Caracalla, Rome, bronze sestertius (A.D. 210-11). Obverse: MAVREL ANTONINVS PIVS AVG BRIT; laureate head right. Reverse: CONCORDIAE AVGG / S C; Caracalla and Geta standing left and right, face to face, one crowned by a deity, possibly Apollo or Liber, the other by Hercules. Actual Size: 32mm



FIGURE 13: Geta, Laodicea, silver denarius (c. A.D. 202-03). Obverse: L SEPTIMIVS GETA CAES; bare-headed bust right, draped and cuirassed. Reverse: FELICITAS TEMPOR; Felicitas standing right, holding caduceus and clasping hands with Geta, togate, standing facing, head left, holding cornucopia. Actual Size: 19mm



FIGURE 16: Geta, Rome, bronze sestertius (A.D. 210). Obverse: IMP CAES P SEPT GETA PIVS AVG; laureate bust right. Reverse: PONTIF TR P II COS II / S C; Caracalla and Geta standing left and right, face to face, sacrificing out of a patera (bowl) over lighted tripod; behind, bull prostrate facing left; in center, flute player. Actual Size: 34mm



FIGURE 14: Geta, Rome, silver denarius (A.D. 199-202). Obverse: P SEPT GETA CAES PONT; bare-headed bust right, draped. Reverse: CASTOR; Castor standing front, head left, beside horse standing left, holding scepter. This reverse type links Geta with Castor of the Dioscuri, who was the mortal half-brother of the immortal Pollux. Actual Size: 20mm



FIGURE 17: Geta, Rome, silver denarius (A.D. 211). Obverse: P SEPT GETA PIVS AVG BRIT; laureate head right. Reverse: ADVENTVS AVGVSTI; Geta, in military dress with cloak flying, on horse walking left; he raises right hand and holds scepter in left. Actual Size: 19mm



FIGURE 18: *Geta, Rome, silver denarius (late A.D. 209). Obverse: IMP CAES P SEPT GETA PIVS AVG; laureate head right. Reverse: PONTIF TR P COS II; Geta on horseback charging left, brandishing spear at enemy on ground, who defends himself with spear and shield.*

Actual Size: 19mm



FIGURE 20: *Geta (as Augustus), Thrace, Topiros (A.D. 209-212, bronze). Obverse: AVT K P CCEPTIMI GETAC; laureate head right, circular POL pseudo-countermark on shoulder. Reverse: OVLPIAC TOPCIROV; Geta on horseback galloping right, holding spear. Very rare—this coin is perhaps the third known example.*

Actual Size: 28mm



FIGURE 19: *Geta, Rome, silver denarius (A.D. 210). Obverse: P SEPT GETA PIVS AVG BRIT; laureate head right. Reverse: TR P III COS II P P; Providentia (variously described as Aeternitas or Pax) standing front, head left, holding lighted torch and globe.*

Actual Size: 19mm



FIGURE 21: *Geta (as Augustus), Bithynia, Chalcedon (A.D. 209-12, bronze). Obverse: AVT K M CCEII GETAC AVTO; laureate bust left, cuirassed. Reverse: KAAXAIONION; Apollo standing left, holding laurel branch, lyre atop pillar. Possibly unique.*

Actual Size: 31mm

MORE COINAGE of Geta

subjects. Differences in quality and style among the coinage of numerous provincial cities depended largely upon the training and skill of local die engravers. These portraits are best described as “veristic” rather than “realistic.” This is because it is impossible to verify how closely the appearance of any given portrait matches the true appearance of the actual living person.

Geta never ruled independently. He wielded a limited amount of autonomous power because his father Severus and brother Caracalla overshadowed him. This, combined with his short reign as Augustus (209-11), makes him a figure of relatively minor influence in the grand span of Roman history. Yet the prolific number of coins bearing Geta’s image attests to the importance of his role in an overarching program of propagandistic imagery. Provincial cities were obligated to venerate the imperial cult on their coinage. Numismatic portraits presented Roman rulers as divinely sanctioned personages worthy of devotion. Portraits are also a form of didactic art that enabled the local citizenry to become “acquainted” with the members of the ruling dynasty.



GETA



GETA'S NAME was removed from public inscriptions, such as this one commemorating the restoration of the Rufian Baths in Cagliari.

ing the mass slaughter of Geta’s supporters. He nonetheless recognized that his younger brother had been held in general favor by most soldiers and citizens. Caracalla thus moved to appease the populace, granting to Geta the honor of an emperor’s funeral and the status of a god. But he also ordered Geta’s name and image to be expunged from all public monuments and inscriptions. For practical reasons, this *damnatio memoriae* (“condemnation of the memory”) does not seem to have included the widespread melting of Geta’s coinage. Instances of private defacement do exist but are rare (Figure 22). However, magistrates of a few cities in Asia Minor, perhaps in a show of loyalty to their new sole master, systematically recalled large bronze civic coins bearing images of Geta facing another family member (Figures 23-25). After Geta’s portrait had been erased, the coins were revalidated with a counterstamp and placed back into circulation. ■

SOURCES

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Julia, covered in blood and wounding her hand, tried in vain to deflect a hail of sword blows as the 22-year-old Geta died in her arms.”

THE DIFFERENCES between Geta and Caracalla as rival corulers seemed insurmountable. Each fortified his separate apartment in the imperial palace to guard against the threat of assassination by the other. A treaty was drawn for the division of territory: Caracalla would govern Rome and the West, Geta would govern Egypt and the East. This arrangement would have certainly destroyed the empire, tearing it asunder and degenerating into civil war.

In late December 211, the brothers agreed to meet with Julia Domna in her apartment to discuss reconciliation on peaceful terms. Here, Caracalla treacherously directed some hidden centurions to attack Geta, who sought protection at his mother’s breast. Julia, covered in blood and wounding her hand, tried in vain to deflect a hail of sword blows as the 22-year-old Geta died in her arms. Caracalla forbade her to mourn him.

Caracalla consolidated his power by order-



FIGURE 22: *Geta, Laodicea, silver denarius (c. A.D. 203). Obverse: P SEPTIMIUS GETA CAES; bare-headed bust left, draped. Reverse: MINERV SANCT; Minerva standing front, head left, leaning on shield and holding spear. Several chisel blows to Geta's portrait have removed a large portion of his face; this is probably an unofficial damnatio.*

Actual Size: 18mm



FIGURE 24: *Caracalla and Geta, Caria, Stratonicea (c. A.D. 205-9, bronze). Obverse: AY KAI M AYP ANTΩNEINO; laureate bust of Caracalla facing erased bust of Geta; countermarked with head of Caracalla. Reverse: EΠI APX IEPOKAEYC B CTPATONIKEΩN; Nike standing facing, head left, holding wreath and palm. Actual Size: 38mm*



FIGURE 23: *Caracalla and Geta, Mysia, Pergamum (A.D. 198-211, bronze). Obverse: [mostly illegible]; laureate bust of Caracalla facing erased bust of Geta, Geta's name erased in legend; countermark. Reverse: EΠI CTP KAAΥΔIANOY TEPIANΔPOY / ΠEPΓAMHNΩN B NEOKOPΩN in exergue; Tyche standing left, crowned by Nike. Actual Size: 37mm*



FIGURE 25: *Caracalla and Geta, Caria, Stratonicea (c. A.D. 205-9, bronze). Obverse: AY KAI M AYP ANTΩNEINO; laureate bust of Caracalla facing erased bust of Geta, Geta's name erased in legend; countermarked OEOY. Reverse: CEΠIM CEYHPOY EYCEB KAI M AYP [...] KYP CEB in exergue; Zeus Panamaros riding right, holding long transverse scepter. Actual Size: 36mm*

Actual Size: 36mm

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