Roman Coins and Roman History

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Everyone knows that Rome wasn't built in a day, that all roads lead there, and that when there we are to do as the Romans do. Rome is of course the city of seven hills as well as the eternal city but is also urbs et orbis, "city and world." When Roma locuta est, "Rome has spoken," the case is closed once and for all, and as the Roman poet Ovid observes, Roma is Amor, "Love," spelled backwards. Rome is therefore manifestly not just another city, for no other city is the linguistic focal point for so many idiomatic expressions. Ancient Rome is still more, however: a republic that provided the founding fathers of the United States of America with a model par excellence of a mixed constitution and the separation of powers, an empire that rose to unparalleled heights and then slowly but surely fell, a civilization that dominates more than a third of recorded western history, and a culture that endures today in various forms, linguistic, literary, religious, political, and legal. Rome's is therefore a history which must be reckoned with when essaying to understand the historical development of just about any western cultural artifact or institution, and coins are a striking (no pun intended) case in point.

Despite its length, grandeur, and complexity Roman history lends itself to ready and succinct summary. Legends tell us that Romulus founded the city in 753 B.C. and that it was ruled by kings, some of them Etruscan, until 509 B.C. when the republic was inaugurated. Rome grew by leaps and bounds and by 265 B.C. had established itself as master of all Italy, and then via a series of wars with Carthage and other overseas engagements it assumed control of the Mediterranean lands and termed the sea mare nostrum, "our sea." From 133 to 31 B.C. revolutions rocked the Roman world, and when Caesar crossed the Rubicon, he altered the course of history forever. His assassination on the Ides of March in 44 B.C. led ultimately to a monarchy with his grand-nephew and adopted heir Octavian in charge, who as Augustus ruled as the first Roman emperor until his death in A.D. 14.

The Julio-Claudian, Flavian, and Antonine dynasties gave Rome its most famous emperors, who almost continuously expanded the empire's frontiers throughout most of Europe, Asia Minor, and northern Africa, who were deified as a matter of course, and who ruled their vast, prosperous, and relatively peaceful (at least internally) empire with much acclaim until the end of the second century A.D. From A.D. 193 until 284, however, emperor ousted emperor in rapid succession; most were generals whose armies elevated them to imperial power, and most died violent deaths. Late in the third century Diocletian restored order and reformed the government, and after a brief but bloody hiatus Constantine did likewise; under the latter, Christianity became the de facto religion of the empire, but in A.D. 330 he also built another Rome, New Rome, named Constantinople after himself, to which he removed his imperial court. It was just a matter of time until Rome was to fall, but it is a mark of its and the Church's eminence and power that the waves of barbarian invaders were held off as long as they were. The city was sacked in A.D. 410, and finally Romulus Augustulus, generally recognized as the last Roman emperor even though only a child and a usurper, was deposed in A.D. 476.

If Rome's rule had ended, its influence did not. In the east the Byzantine empire was the direct continuation of the Roman and though primarily Greek in culture nonetheless maintained several Roman institutions, most notably the law. Roman law likewise continued in the west, where Latin survived, as did the Roman Church, and the Holy Roman empire soon emerged and ruled central Europe from Rome northward to the Baltic for almost a millennium. To paraphrase the venerable Bede, as long as the Colosseum survives, Rome will survive, and as long as Rome survives, the world will survive. All three survive in one form or another. The history of ancient Rome from 753 B.C. to A.D. 476 is therefore central to an understanding of western history, and what fascinates numismatists and historians alike is that Rome's history is indelibly stamped on its coins.

The economy of regal Rome was one of barter, with value determined by livestock: Latin pecunia, "money," derives from pecus, a collective noun meaning "livestock" and referring especially to sheep and cattle, and "fee" is its English relative. "Money," on the other hand, is derived from Latin moneta, an epithet of the goddess Juno, whose temple on the Capitoline hill in Rome (located under the church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli) was the location of Rome's first mint; thus both "money" and "mint" derive from moneta. The earliest money consisted first of uncoined bronze (aes rude), then cast bronze bars (aes signatum), and finally--tradition says about 289 B.C.--aes grave (literally "heavy bronze"), cast coins with differing weights and concomitantly differing face-values minted at Rome under the supervision of an appointed board of three men known formally as tresviri monetales. The one-pound bronze as (plural asses) was standard. As Roman armies marched southward, they encountered the silver coinage long traditional in the Greek colonies located there, and by 269 B.C. the tresviri monetales were regularly (as opposed to extraordinarily) minting silver coins, which were intended for the south and which were monetarily independent of the traditional bronze asses. So the appearance of silver coinage marks the denouement of Rome's expansion throughout the boot of the Italian peninsula.

The first Punic War with Carthage required more than the usual amount of capital, and so a lighter and therefore slightly devalued silver issue resulted. Around 235 B.C. silver coinage became much more Roman, i.e., less Greek, in style, and the legend ROMANO was replaced by ROMA; both changes signal a greater sense of national self-identity as a consequence of Rome's first international military undertaking. Around the same time, however, the bronze as became a casualty of the war, being reduced to half its original one-pound value. The second Punic War brought Hannibal to Italy, disastrous defeats to the Romans at Lake Trasimene in 217 B.C. and at Cannae a year later, and virtual collapse of the coinage. Around 211 B.C. a new system of gold, silver, and bronze coins arose, based on the silver denarius, worth 10 asses. This quickly became the standard issue, and it lasted, with devaluations, for some 400 years.

The earliest bronze coins had featured deities such as Janus, Mercury, and Apollo. The tresviri monetales patriotically personified Rome and Victory on silver coins issued during the Punic wars and added the Dioscuri to the deities included thereon; two- and four-horse chariots figured more or less prominently on the coins as well. But the tresviri monetales also began adding magistrates' marks, symbols, monograms, abbreviated names, and ultimately, by around 150 B.C., full names, which excluded the ROMA that had been there for so long. Clearly the age of the individual political persona was at hand, and shortly thereafter the tresviri began depicting historical incidents involving their ancestors and services rendered by them. In the age of revolution such historical allusions took on symbolic contemporary significance, especially when allies and followers of powerful generals like Sulla, Pompey, and Julius Caesar were in charge of the mint and unabashedly using coins as instruments of political propaganda. Personal references had replaced the civic legend and patriotic designs on coins just as soldiers swore allegiance to generals rather than to Rome. In 44 B.C. Caesar took the ultimate step and placed a portrait of himself on the silver denarius, the first living Roman ever to do so. It is this coin (no. [60](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/CATALOGUE/060.HTML)) that breaks with the numismatic past once and for all and establishes a new precedent, which becomes the norm in the Roman empire.

Caesar's bold step had, of course, its precedent in Hellenistic coinage. Alexander the Great's successors had replaced portraits of deities with that of him on the coinage they issued, thereby affirming his deification. Soon it became standard minting procedure for Hellenistic monarchs to portray themselves on their coinage even while still alive, as we have seen in the previous essay and on coins nos. [43](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/CATALOGUE/043.HTML), [44](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/CATALOGUE/044.HTML), [46](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/CATALOGUE/046.HTML), [47](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/CATALOGUE/047.HTML), [49](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/CATALOGUE/049.HTML)-[54](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/CATALOGUE/054.HTML), [56](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/CATALOGUE/056.HTML), and [58](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/CATALOGUE/058.HTML). The lesson of the Hellenistic world was not lost on either Caesar or his adherents, and shortly after his death he was apotheosized and became divus Julius, "divine Julius," as the inscription on coin no. 67 attests. And as Alexander's exploits had transformed the Greek world, so Caesar's did the Roman. Thus when the biographer Plutarch (fl. A.D. 100) compiled his parallel lives of famous Greeks and Romans, he quite naturally paired Alexander and Julius Caesar. Caesar did not live long enough to implement his vision of a new Roman state, but by depicting himself on his coins in the veristic or realistic style as an experienced, wise, and elder statesman he was sending a message. It was left to his adopted heir, after another civil war, to deliver that message in its fullest form, namely, the establishment of the Roman empire.

The assassination of Caesar had plunged Rome into turmoil; ditto, in a sense, for its coinage, as the mint even shut down in 40 B.C. The triumvirs in charge of the government (Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus) struck coins in gold and silver, their allies and subordinates also coined in bronze, and all the numismatic imagery was designedly political in nature. Antony and Octavian, especially after they divided the Roman world into eastern and western sectors under their respective leadership, needed not only the money but also the propaganda gained from minting coins as they endeavored to gain power over each other. The battle at Actium in 31 B.C. ended the struggle: Antony and Cleopatra were defeated, Octavian stood alone at the top of the Roman world, but he was faced with the daunting task of reinventing its government. The republic had acquitted itself well during the lengthy period of, first, Italian and then, due to the Punic wars, Mediterranean expansion but had only uncomfortably allowed Caesar to expand into Europe, and then only because it could not prevent him from doing so; the age of revolution had taken its toll. The world--Rome was by this time *urbs et orbis,* "city and world," insofar as the Romans and their international dependents were concerned--needed stability more than anything else, and that is what Octavian gave it, in the form of an empire that externally accommodated itself to traditional republican offices and duties but that internally vested power in one man, Octavian himself, and in his personal, imperial bureaucracy. The passage from republic to empire and the accomplishments of Rome's "first citizen" are abundantly documented on the coins issued during, and even after, his reign.  
  
Numerous coins celebrate the achievements abroad whereby Octavian, or Augustus as he was later named (see below), stabilized the frontiers of the empire: he defeated his rival Sextus Pompey early (no. [67](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/067.html)), thereby controlling the western Mediterranean; consolidated the eastern Mediterranean by capturing Egypt (nos. [61](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/061.html), [62](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/062.html)); expanded the empire in the north (no. [68](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/068.html)); and secured the eastern border with Parthia via an historic diplomatic, rather than military, success (nos. [63](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/063.html), [64](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/064.html)). He spent time in the provinces (no. [68](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/068.html)) and balanced the competing claims of social classes as well as of geographical areas. These successes and victories assured the *Pax Augusta*, "Augustan peace," which allowed both business and government to prosper, and earned Augustus many honors, two of which-the *clipeus virtutis*, "shield of virtue," and *corona civica*, "civic crown"-appear on coin no. [65](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/065.html). He also stabilized and reformed Rome's coinage. The gold *aureus* and silver *denarius* he retained at clearly established and constant values (40 and 84 to the Roman pound respectively), he introduced token "bronze" coinage in brass (*orichalcum*) and in copper, and he allowed provinces and regions to mint in bronze. The major imperial mints issued gold and silver coins featuring Augustus' achievements, *i.e.*, his military victories and the peace and prosperity he secured, whereas bronze coins tended to emphasize his civil powers and honors and were stamped SC (*senatus consulto*, "by decree of the senate"). This model continued for almost three centuries. The gold and silver imperial coins circulated widely among the wealthier classes, whom Augustus favored (but not so much as to cause animosity), whereas the bronze *as* and *dupondius* or double *as* became the civil and military standard.

Augustus re-emphasized those traditional Roman virtues of family and religion, which had been cast aside during the age of revolution, and gave them a renewed vigor in Roman life, law, and literature, as various iconographical details on even his gold and silver coins attest. The metaphor of the family, divine or human, served him particularly well. On coins nos. [61](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/061.html) and [62](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/062.html) Octavian is identified as *imperator* and as *consul* respectively, but early in 27 B.C. he received from the Senate the honorary title *Augustus*, which was henceforth used by him and succeeding emperors and which therefore appears on his and their coins (nos. [63](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/063.html) and following). He himself chose *Princeps*, an unofficial title, to designate his own constitutional position; it was a particularly felicitous expression, at one and the same time linking himself with all citizens but unambiguously according him primacy of place as the "first citizen." From there it was but a small onomastic step to being proclaimed *Pater Patriae*, "Father of the Fatherland" (no. [69](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/069.html)), and provincial altars to Roma and Augustus soon proclaimed the cult of the emperor. The symbolic accouterments of such titles were guaranteed to remain the exclusive property of the emperor, for Augustus had seen to it that Roman coinage, whatever its provenance, displayed the emperor's portrait on obverse. Moreover, he reopened the mint at Rome and opened another imperial mint at Lugdunum, modern Lyons, in Gaul (see no. [68](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/068.html)); soon the names of the *tresviri monetales* disappeared entirely from coins (see no. [63](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/063.html)), for the mints were now under the control of the emperor's slaves and freedmen. Augustus therefore stabilized not only the empire but also its coinage, and since the pattern--an imperial portrait on obverse and propagandistic, but historically significant, symbols on reverse--was set for centuries to come, the matter of style becomes much more of an issue. Romans knew what to expect to see on their coins, but the manner of presentation was another matter entirely.  
  
The veristic style of Caesar was not for Augustus. Instead he opted for a youthful, idealistic visage (nos. [62](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/062.html)-[68](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/068.html)), which he continued imprinting even as he aged (no. [69](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/069.html)). The youth, the eternal youth, of the emperor matched the youth of the empire, which was encapsulated in the figure of the emperor. Augustus' hairstyle is distinctive (the locks are combed down over the forehead), and his features are idealized; the empire is well administered, and there is something more to its emperor than meets the eye. The symbols on the reverse were unambiguously Augustan as well. These defining characteristics continued to play a stylistic role in Roman coinage until the very end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, for so great was Augustus' popularity that his successors wished to capitalize on whatever symbolic associations with him they could adduce. After all, in an empire succession is not just the name of the game, it is the game. Thus when Tiberius succeeded Augustus, his *aurei* and *denarii* emphasized the close relationship between stepson and stepfather, especially since the latter had intended his adopted grandsons Gaius and Lucius Caesar to succeed (see no. [69](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/069.html)). Due to the boys' untimely deaths, Tiberius was adopted and so inherited the throne; legitimizing that succession was a task reserved in part for his coinage, and so in both hairstyle and idealized features Tiberius adopted an Augustan style on his coin portraits. Caligula (nos. [71](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/071.html), [72](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/072.html)) and Claudius followed Tiberius' lead in emphasizing their putative Augustan virtues and characteristics, as did Nero at first.

Nero, for reasons beyond our ken, after adhering to Augustan style in general, departed from it and introduced a harsh verisimilitude into his portraits. His fleshy chin and neck, receding mouth and rounded chin, long wavy hair, sideburns, and beard (see especially nos. [73](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/073.html)-[75](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/075.html)) make Nero one of the most readily identifiable of all Roman emperors. (The change from idealized to realistic portraiture on Nero's coins is almost a paradigm case of Tacitean historiography, for Tacitus assumed that emperors at first dissimulated or hid their true, *i.e.*, evil, character and then sooner or later let their real selves be seen; the parallel is striking, but we ought not think that Nero's coinage actually influenced Tacitus in this regard.) Given his generally debauched appearance, it comes as no surprise that his reign was marked by turmoil. The need for increased funds to rebuild Rome after the disastrous fire of A.D. 64 and to cover military expenses in the East, as well as a rise in the price of precious metals, led to monetary reform (see nos. [74](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/074.html), [79](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/079.html)). Both the *aureus* and the *denarius* were reduced in weight, the *denarius* was debased (a debasement which, once begun, continued periodically), and the bronze *sestertius* was reintroduced (nos. [75](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/075.html)-[79](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/079.html)). These larger-sized *sestertii* allowed Nero's die-engravers to indulge themselves artistically in carefully developed portraits and, much to historians' delight, in a wealth of realistic detail, neither of which, however, could disguise the fact that the emperor at least, and perhaps even the empire, was in trouble. Nero was assassinated in A.D. 68, and the next year witnessed four emperors in succession, each of whom adopted an uncompromising realism as his portraiture style (*cf.* nos. [80](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/080.html), [81](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/081.html)), as would logically befit military men.  
  
The "Year of the Four Emperors," as A.D. 69 is often termed, was critical for the future of the empire. Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian had each been proclaimed emperor by their respective legions, and a military dictatorship could easily have resulted. That it did not ranks as Vespasian's signal achievement: he restored peace, reaffirmed the civilian character of the governmental apparatus, guaranteed the succession of his sons Titus and Domitian (thereby founding a new dynasty), and resumed the task of governing the empire. He was a no-nonsense emperor, and the portraits on his coins depict him in precisely that fashion (see nos. [82](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/082.html), [83](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/083.html)). His realistic features stamp him as a man of the people and as the *restitutor orbis*, "restorer of the world." During his reign two events stand out, at least in retrospect, namely, the capture of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 by his elder son Titus and the construction, begun the next year, of the Flavian Ampitheater, later dubbed the Colosseum, and both events are featured on coins of the era (nos. [83](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/083.html), [84](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/084.html)). All three Flavian emperors were military men, and their efforts at strengthening and consolidating the empire's frontiers brought considerable prosperity to the provinces as well as new subjects for their coins (nos. [82](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/082.html)-[88](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/088.html)). Domitian's early coins (see nos. [85](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/085.html), [86](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/086.html)) honor Minerva, the warrior goddess and his patron deity, but later coins (see no. [88](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/088.html)) honor Jupiter, the supreme god of all; it may not be coincidental that Domitian became increasingly autocratic during his tenure as emperor, which ended in a reign of terror and his own murder in September of A.D. 96.

Rome again required stability and got it, this time for almost a century, in the reigns of the so-called Five Good Emperors. This period, especially its latter half or so, was characterized by Gibbon as the happiest era known to man, and the coins minted by Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius witness credibly to the relative validity of that judgment. Although the legends on Nervan coins extolling Public Liberty, Prosperity, Equity, Justice, and, in particular, Harmony of the Armies surely represent wishful thinking more than they do historical reality, nonetheless those are the virtues that were destined to prevail. Nerva appeased the legions by designating a military man as his heir, and it was under Trajan (A.D. 98-117) that the empire attained its maximum geographical extent. The policy of designating the most competent man as imperial successor brought Hadrian to the throne next, and his extensive travels, penchant for Greek culture, and engineering prowess measurably enhanced both the city and the empire; his mausoleum is today the Castel San Angelo, the Pantheon is one of the architectural marvels of the ancient world, and the design of the Temple of Venus and Rome combines Greek harmony and Roman monumentality. Exactly why Antoninus was designated *Pius*, "Devout," by the Senate is not ours to know (see no. [96](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/096.html)), but the peace and prosperity that characterized his reign surely merited an epithet of distinction. Ironically it was the Stoic philosopher and emperor Marcus Aurelius who effectively ended the halcyon era of the empire by appointing his incompetent and corrupt son Commodus as his successor, although military affairs did loom larger in the father's reign than they had earlier.  
  
The regalia of peace figure prominently on nos. [89](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/089.html), [93](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/093.html), [94](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/094.html), [96](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/096.html), [97](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/097.html), [104](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/104.html), coins which encompass this relatively peaceful era chronologically. Even more conspicuous are the women on nos. [91](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/091.html), [95](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/095.html), [98](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/098.html)-[101,](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/101.html)[105](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/105.html), whose garments and hairstyles eloquently testify to the affluence of the age. The portraits of the emperors, each unique, testify equally as eloquently to their distinctive personalities, which in turn mirror their imperial policies. The odd mixture of idealism and realism on Nerva's coins is peculiarly characteristic of an emperor who had to maintain an ambivalent balance between the competing claims of senatorial and military factions. Trajan's conscious iconographical (hairstyle) and linguistic (*optimus princeps*, "the best first citizen") imitation of Augustus was impossible for even the most provincial of Roman citizens not to notice. Hadrian's beard signals a major innovation in numismatic portraiture, one that is almost uniformly followed until the fourth century. In his case the beard was surely less of an affectation than an honest acknowledgement of his genuine affection for Greek culture. Antoninus Pius' beard denotes an orderly succession as well as the beginning of a trend, and the high classicizing style connotes a charitable personality; indeed, he may have been too charitable. The Roman welfare state had been around for some time, but it increased under Antoninus' misguided (?) largesse. The *congiaria*, "monetary dispensations," lauded on no. [96](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/096.html) were but half of the story, for *alimenta*, "food distributions," were equally abundant; welfare checks and food stamps have ancient analogues, but so too do charitable foundations (cf. no. [99](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/099.html)). The most memorable portrait of Marcus Aurelius is that of the monumental equestrian statue which Michelangelo placed in the exact center of the Campidoglio in Rome and which is now located inside the Capitoline Museum nearby, but it does not render the military aspect of the portrait complete, as, *e.g.*, coin no. [106](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/106.html) does. And it is not an accident that Mars appears on no. [103](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/103.html). Wars are on the historical horizon, so too is a divided empire (Aurelius shared power with Lucius Verus for eight years; see no. [106](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/106.html)), and the psychological depth so manifest on Aurelius' portraits almost makes the informed viewer wonder whether the philosopher-emperor was somehow aware of what the future had in store for the empire. The reign of Commodus (A.D. 180-192) marks the end of one era and ushers in the beginning of another. Its ambiguous historical niche is visibly connoted on coin no. [108](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/108.html): on the obverse is a portrait of Commodus' allegedly adulterous wife, and the reverse features a personification of chastity.

If the last century or so had enjoyed unparalleled peace and prosperity, the next was to witness unprecedented warfare, revolution, and bloodshed. Emperors came and went in a hurry, most were killed either by their own soldiers or would-be successors, and only one died a natural death. Imperial coins continue to serve the emperors' needs: blatant propaganda (nos. [109](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/109.html), [115](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/115.html)), attempts to initiate dynastic succession (nos. [111](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/111.html), [112](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/112.html)), celebrations of military success (no. [123](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/123.html)), glorification of female family members (nos. [113](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/113.html), [124](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/124.html)), and notification of religious affiliations (nos. [116](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/116.html), [122](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/122.html)). The topicality of the imagery and subject-matter effectively symbolizes the rapid turnover of emperors, but the portrait styles, on the other hand, are uniform and, as befits the age, unremittingly military. Septimius Severus sets the trend (nos. [110](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/110.html)-[112](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/112.html)), and his son Caracalla adds a rough and rugged tone to it (no. [114](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/114.html)). Some of the emperors were young (no. [117](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/117.3.html)), born far from Rome (no. [118](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/118.html)), manifestly disturbed (no. [119](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/119.html)), highly individualistic (no. [121](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/121.html)), and proud (no. [122](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/122.html)), but all stressed their role as commander-in-chief of the military. The beauty and often striking imagery of these coins cannot, however, hide the fact that the empire was in a state of collapse. Neither can their monetary value.  
  
The debasement of the *denarius* begun under Nero (A.D. 54-68) reached more than 50 per cent under Caracalla in A.D. 215. Caracalla also created a new double *denarius*, the *antoninianus*, which, however, had the weight of only one and one-half *denarii*; by the reign of Philip the Arab (A.D. 244-249; see no. [118](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/118.html)) it had almost rendered the *denarius* obsolete. The devaluation and debasement of silver continued unabated: under Trajan Decius (no. [119](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/119.html)) the *antoninianus* was worth no more than a *denarius*, and in A.D. 259 its silver content was down to 15 per cent. Gold too had been successively devalued, from Nero's 1/45 of a pound to Caracalla's 1/50 to an even lower and fluctuating standard in the reign of Gallienus (no. [120](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/120.html)), when the fineness of silver coins further dropped to 2.5 per cent. The emperor Aurelian (A.D. 270-275) was hailed as *restitutor orbis*, "restorer of the world," a title reminiscent of Vespasian and one he earned by virtue of his military successes, his reform of the coinage, and the building of a defensive wall around the city of Rome, much of which stands today and which still bears his name. Yet his reform was only partial, raising weight and fineness standards only marginally. Clearly the empire was in economic peril, but since something is better than nothing, Aurelian's reformed coinage got the empire through the immediate crisis just as his wall kept the barbarians at bay. Serious reform in both coinage and government came with the accession of Diocletian in A.D. 284.

Diocletian divided the empire into eastern and western halves with a senior *Augustus* and a junior *Caesar* (see no. [125](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/125.html)) in charge of each; this was his famous tetrarchy or rule of four. He also redrew the map of provincial geography, redistributed administrative duties, reconstructed defensive works, and in a series of moves redefined Roman coinage. His most thorough measures were taken in A.D. 294. He minted gold coins at 60 to the pound, silver coins of nearly pure silver--good silver coins at that (see no. [125](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/125.html))--at 96 to the pound, and several sets of bronze coins varying in size and value. The monetary reformation went hand-in-hand with the institution of wage and price controls; the latter were unsuccessful, and although the former did not garner as much confidence as the emperor had hoped, the new coins were almost universally minted throughout the empire. In A.D. 305 Diocletian voluntarily retired, and after a series of power struggles, shared imperial titles, and bloody battles, Constantine the Great reigned supreme as the one and only emperor.  
  
Constantine's position in history is assured by virtue of two extraordinary actions he took, both of which were eminently successful but which were, paradoxically, at odds with one another: he founded Constantinople and moved the imperial headquarters there, but he also made Christianity the *de facto* religion of the empire. The former act effectively spelled the end of Rome's position at the center of the empire, but the latter effectively initiated the city's role as the center of the Church. To be sure, Julian the Apostate later attempted to restore paganism, as witnesses the bearded, pagan, philosophical portrait on his coins (see no. [129](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/129.html)), and even later Theodosius I temporarily reunited the two halves of the empire; but after Constantine the imperial bureaucracy--civil, military, diplomatic, legal, and educational--was headquartered in the east, and the Church, which was both a religious and a cultural entity, held sway in the west, which thereby enjoyed a resurgence of intellectual energy in the persons of Jerome, Augustine, *et al.*, and even the pagan Symmachus. Yet Constantine was also responsible for a major and final innovation in Roman coinage. He struck a lighter *aureus* at 72 to the pound, which, known as the *solidus*, became famous as the only coin of the realm which was accepted as payment for taxes. The *solidus* (no. [128](https://www2.lawrence.edu/dept/art/BUERGER/catalogue/128.html)) remained the standard gold coin until the turn of the millennium, 700 years later.

History is not merely recorded, it is also minted. Augustus inaugurated the Roman empire and made the *aureus* the standard gold coin of his principate, and however devalued it may have become over the centuries, it remained as such until Constantine introduced the *solidus*, and with it the Byzantine empire. The coins which have figured so prominently in documenting the history of Rome are the coins which figure so prominently in this exhibition and its catalogue.  
  
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