

An Unpublished Coin of Trajan

by Peter E. Lewis

Entrance to Alexandria harbour at sunset. (Wikimedia Commons)

JOHN Cresswell is a member of the Gold Coast Coin Club and he asked me to identify a large bronze coin that he had in his collection. (Figure 1) He could not remember when and how he acquired it but it was many years ago when he was living in New Zealand. Although the obverse is very worn some of the letters were readable and after a little research they were found to be part of a long inscription in Greek referring to the Roman emperor Trajan, 98-117 AD. (Figure 2) The inscription [AYTTRAIA] NAPICEBΓ EPM[ΔAKIKΠIAP] means 'Commander Trajan Optimus Augustus Germanicus Dacicus Parthicus.' This inscription occurs on coins of Trajan minted at Alexandria in Egypt after February 116 when Trajan adopted the

title Parthicus to celebrate his victory over the Parthians in Mesopotamia. The other titles celebrated his previous victories over the Germans and the Dacians. Trajan had been a very successful general and the Roman Empire achieved its greatest extent during his reign. (Figure 3 - map)

On the reverse of the coin there is a quadriga (chariot with four horses) driven by the god Sarapis, also known as Serapis. We know it is Sarapis because he is always shown with a basket or pot on his head. (Figures 4 and 5) He is raising his right arm and holding a sceptre with an eagle on the top with his left hand. The letters LK mean 'in year 20', which was 116/117 AD.

A search of all the reference books

failed to find a coin of Trajan minted at Alexandria after February 116 with Sarapis driving a quadriga on the reverse. Even *Roman Provincial Coinage*, Volume III, published in 2015 by the British Museum and the Bibliothèque nationale de France, did not have it. Volume III deals only with the period from 96 to 138 and lists 6570 coins. *RPC* is now freely available online: just type 'Roman Provincial Coinage' into the search engine on your computer and click on 'Coin Database'. It is an amazing resource for collectors of ancient coins. It aims to be comprehensive, and if collectors think they have an unpublished coin not listed on *RPC Online* they can contact the organizers. Therefore I sent an email with images of Trajan's coin and after a



Figure 1 – Bronze coin, 33 mms in diameter, weighing 14.79 grams, with alignment 6h.

few days I received a reply from Andrew Burnett who was formerly Keeper of Coins at the British Museum and one of the authors of RPC III. He confirmed that it was a new type previously unpublished and said that it would be listed in RPC III Online as 4950A.

Why is the coin so rare? The answer is probably because Trajan died in 117 and the minting of the coin would have ceased immediately. Only a small number of coins might have been produced before his death. Obviously a mint-master who continued to issue coins bearing the name of the previous emperor might have found himself in trouble with the new emperor especially if there was doubt about the legitimacy of the new emperor. In this case, however, Trajan had nominated Hadrian to be his successor and the transfer of power occurred without any major problems.

The coin that will be RPC III 4950A is significant for several reasons. Only three of the coins minted at Alexandria by Trajan have a quadriga on the reverse. The drivers of the quadriga are Sarapis (Figure 1), the sun-god (Figure 6) and Trajan (Figure 7). The implication was that Trajan himself was divine. So the coins were part of a strategy to prepare the people for the eventual deification of the emperor. By 117 Trajan was getting old. He was about 64, which was considered quite old at the time, and time was running out for him. Soon after his death in August 117 he was deified, and Hadrian issued Divus Trajan (Divine

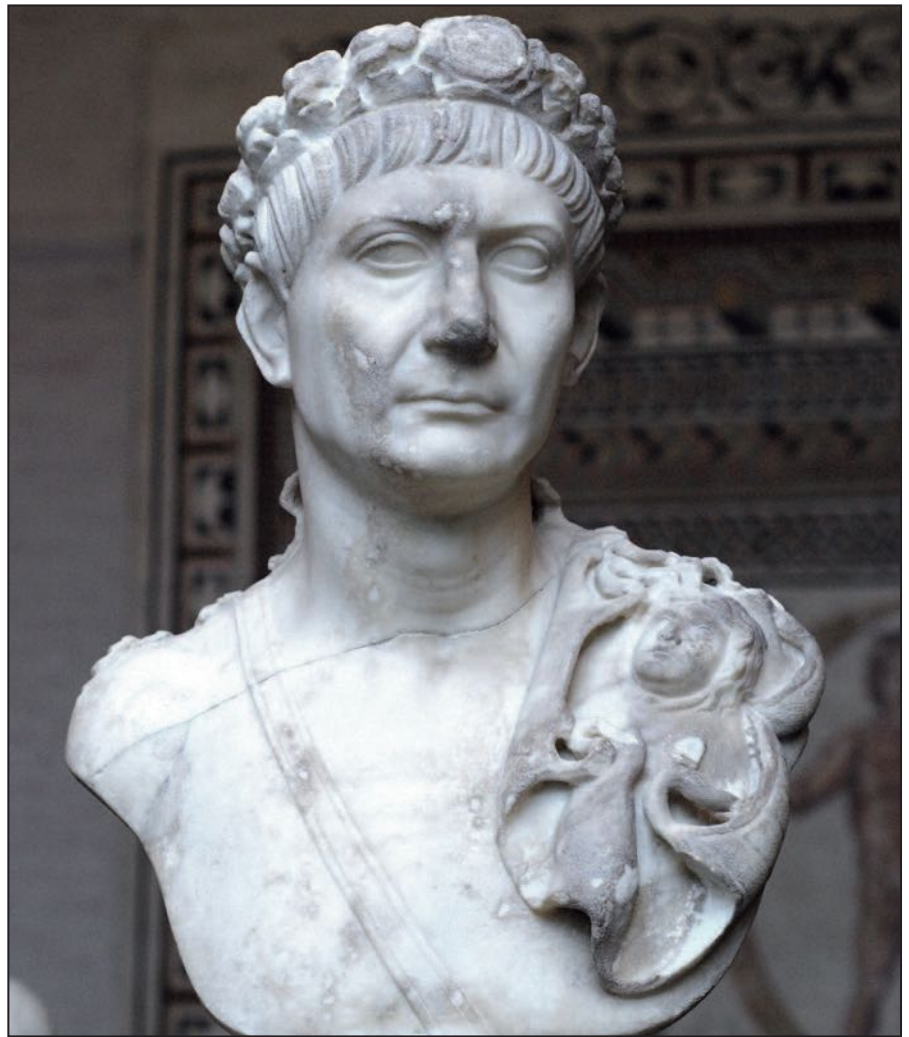


Figure 2 – Marble bust of Trajan from the Palace Bevilacqua in Verona. On his shoulder he wears the Aegis (a small cloak with a gorgon's head in the centre). (Wikimedia Commons)

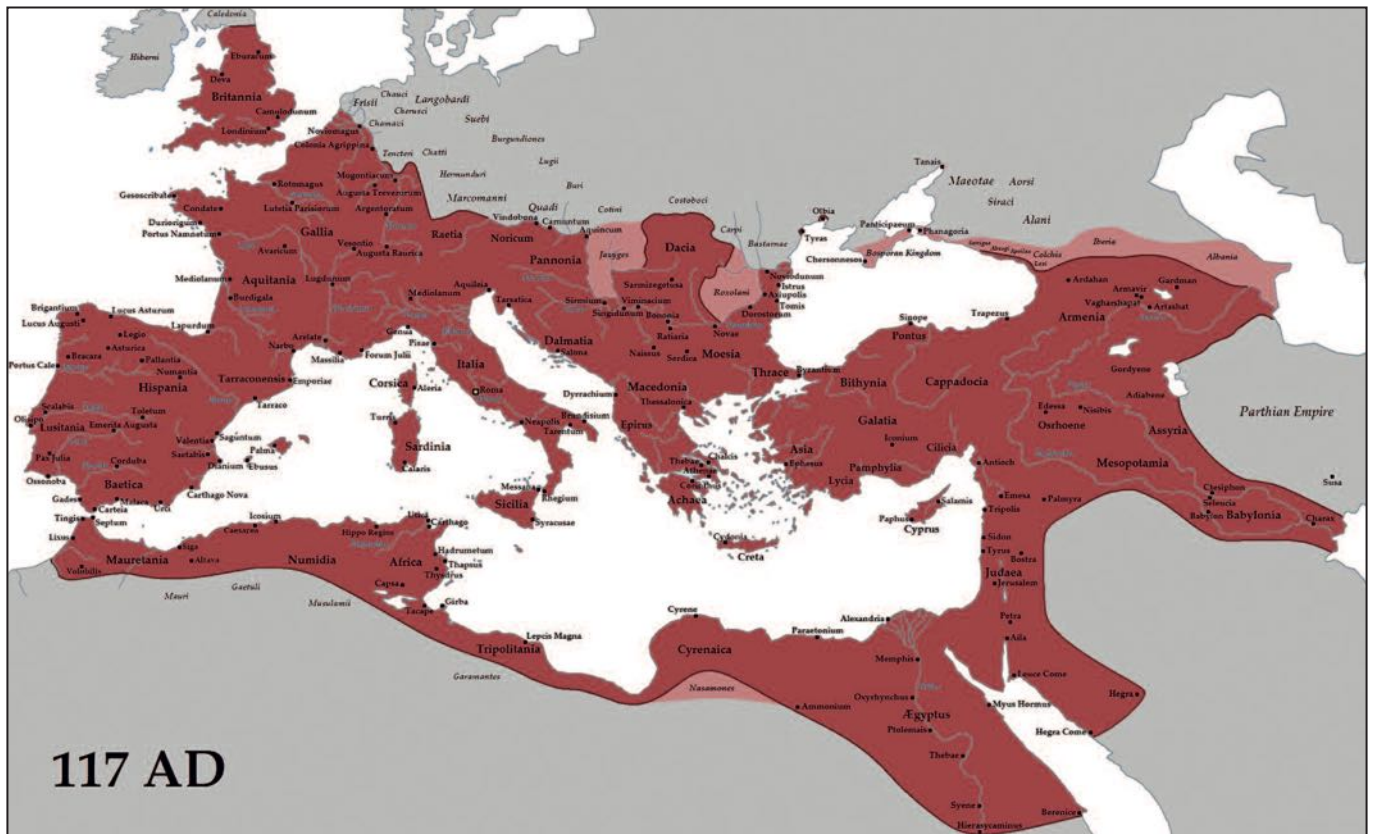


Figure 3 – Map of the Roman Empire in 117 AD. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 4 – Billon tetradrachm of Trajan with Sarapis on the reverse.
Trajan wears the Aegis on his left shoulder. LK = year 20 = 117 AD. (Münzen & Medaillen Auction 14, Lot 773)

Trajan) coins. On a gold aureus minted at Rome in 118 Trajan drives a quadriga and holds an eagle-tipped sceptre. (Figure 8) He died in Cilicia and his body was taken to Rome where it was cremated and the ashes put in a golden urn which was placed in the base of Trajan's column. (Figures 9 and 10).

Sarapis was a popular god, especially with Trajan, and from year 2 he appears on Trajan's coins minted at Alexandria. Sometimes Sarapis stands in a temple

(Figure 11) or sits on a throne. (Figure 12) The name was a combination of Osiris and Apis. Osiris was the Egyptian god of the underworld and Apis was the sacred Egyptian bull. Sarapis was originally a god of the underworld but he was

reintroduced as a new god by the Greek pharaoh Ptolemy I (305-284 BC) who was one of the generals of Alexander the Great. He wanted to promote a god with characteristics of the Greek gods which would appeal to Greeks and Egyptians.



Figure 5 – Marble bust of Sarapis in the Vatican Museum. It is a Roman copy of a Greek original. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 6 – Bronze drachm of Trajan with the sun-god (Helios) driving a quadriga on the reverse. Helios traversed the sky during the day and the underworld at night. He was assimilated with Sarapis. (Classical Numismatic Group, Auction 91, Lot 722. <http://cngcoins.com>)



Figure 7 – Bronze drachm of Trajan showing him driving a quadriga. (Dr Busso Peus Nachfolger Auction 398, Lot 772)

So Sarapis looks like Zeus with a basket on his head to indicate fertility. Zeus was the chief of the gods and he was known to the Romans as Jupiter. Sarapis was also revered as a sun-god and a healing god. In other words, he was multipurpose and he became popular throughout the Roman Empire.

There were temples to Sarapis in the major cities, and a Latin inscription found in Jerusalem showed that Trajan had built a temple there. The inscription began with the words, 'To Jupiter Sarapis, the best and the greatest.' The main temple was at Alexandria in Egypt. It was an extensive complex and it must have been very impressive, but when Christianity became the official religion of the empire under Theodosius I the Serapeum at Alexandria was destroyed in 391. (Figure 13)

How did a coin minted at Alexandria in 117 AD get to New Zealand? The most likely explanation is that it was with a soldier returning from World War I. War was declared on 4th August 1914, and in October 1914 New Zealand sent 7000 men to train in Egypt where they joined units from Australia to form the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC). The troops went into army camps in the desert around Cairo. (Figure 14). These Anzacs formed part of the Allied force that landed on the Gallipoli Peninsula in Turkey on 25th April 1915. Thousands of New Zealand



Figure 8 – Gold aureus minted by Hadrian at Rome in 118 AD. Trajan is on the obverse with the words *DIVO TRAIANO* (to the divine Trajan). On the reverse Trajan holds a branch and an eagle tipped sceptre. (Numismatica Ars Classica NAC AG, Auction 49, Lot 206)



Figure 9 – Dupondius of Trajan minted at Rome in 114 AD showing Trajan's column on the reverse. Scenes from the Dacian wars are depicted in relief in a spiral pattern on the column. Two eagles were at the base. It still stands but with St Peter on the top instead of Trajan. (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 67, Lot 1437)



Figure 10 – Trajan's Column in Trajan's Forum in Rome. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Carole Raddato)



Figure 11 – Bronze hemidrachm of Trajan showing Sarapis standing in a temple. On the pediment there is a winged sun-disc. (Classical Numismatic Group, electronic Auction 163, Lot 209)



Figure 12 – Bronze drachm of Trajan showing Sarapis enthroned. Kerberos, the dog that guards the underworld, is on the ground to the left. (Classical Numismatic Group, electronic Auction 347, Lot 448)

soldiers were killed or wounded in the Gallipoli campaign. Actually the totals for World War I were 18,000 killed and 50,000 wounded. The wounded were taken to hospitals in Alexandria in Egypt and it might have been one of these wounded Anzacs who acquired the coin and brought it back to New Zealand.

One can imagine a soldier being approached by a local man hoping to sell the metal disc he had found. Why would the soldier have bought it? It looked like a dirty thing and the face on one side was almost completely worn away. The answer, surely, was the horses. He could not have known what it really was, but

many of the Anzacs were horsemen and they loved their horses.

It is amazing to think that after 1902 years a previously unidentified coin should be revealed as a coin of the Roman emperor Trajan minted at Alexandria in 117 AD. Trajan was also a soldier and he would have loved the horses just as the Anzacs did. The connection with horses might have been the coin's "life-line", but its identification demonstrates the benefits of coin collectors belonging to a club or society where knowledge is shared, friendships made and mutual interests enjoyed.

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Figure 13 – View of the ruins of the Serapeum in Alexandria. The ancient floor level is metres below the current ground level. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Roland Unger)

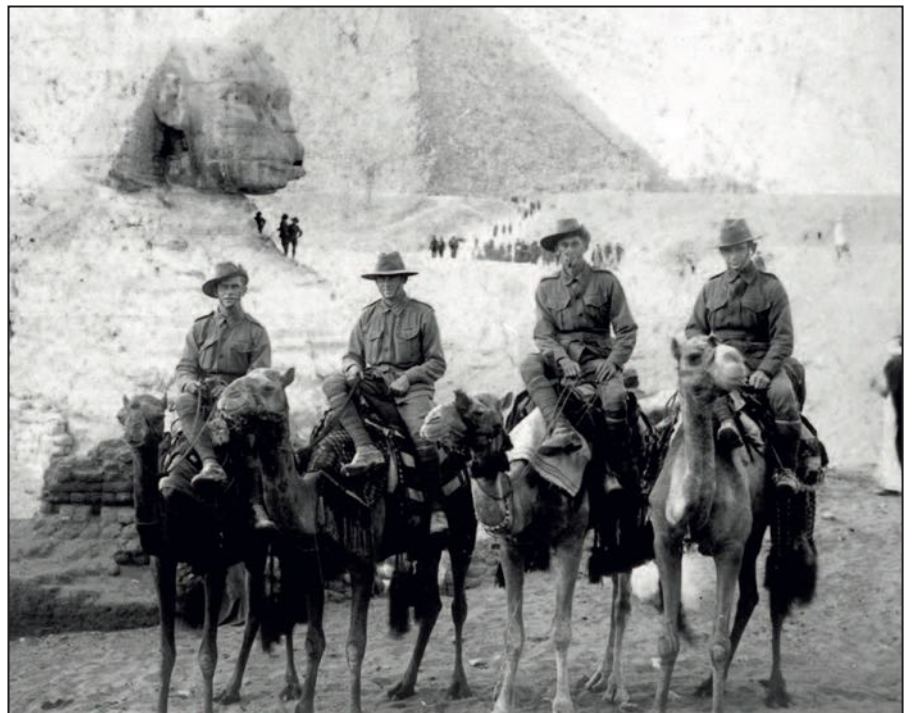


Figure 14 – Anzacs enjoying camel rides near the pyramids in January 1915. (Wikimedia Commons. Photos in the State Library of Queensland)