

Exhibition of Coins of First-Century Roman Emperors

by Peter E. Lewis



View of the Roman Forum. (Wikimedia Commons)

THE Centre for Coins, Culture and Religious History (<https://cccrh.org>) is a non-profit organization. One of the exhibitions it makes available to schools, churches and other groups is a collection

of coins showing the portraits of the rulers of the Roman Empire in the 1st century AD. These men and this century are important in the history of western civilization and Christianity. Hopefully seeing the coins that circulated at that time will encourage people to take an interest in the events that occurred and realize that the Christian faith is historically based.

Before dealing with Augustus, who was the first Roman emperor, one needs to know that Rome had been a republic since Tarquinius, the last king of Rome, was expelled in 509 BC. The Romans were militaristic and with their strong army they gradually gained control of the whole of Italy. Many coins were issued by the republic, and one that illustrates their

military spirit has Mars, the god of war, on the obverse and Roman soldiers fighting a barbarian on the reverse. We know he is a barbarian because he has horns on his helmet. (**Figure 1**)

In 45 BC Julius Caesar returned to Rome after conquering Gaul and in 44 BC he became dictator for life, thus ending the republic, but many Romans objected to this and he was assassinated. His portrait appears on some of his coins and it is fairly consistent, which means that he really did look as shown on the coins. (**Figure 2**) Actually from this time until the end of the 3rd century the rulers are realistically portrayed on their coins, which adds greatly to their interest.

After the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC the Roman territories



Figure 1 – Denarius minted at Rome in 103 BC during the republic. Mars is on the obverse and soldiers are fighting on the reverse. The Roman soldier on the left is trying to protect his fallen comrade. Sear 197.



Figure 2 – Denarius of Julius Caesar. The crescent moon behind him refers to his changing the calendar. He claimed to be descended from the goddess, Venus, who stands on the reverse holding Victory on her hand. Sear 1408.



Figure 3 – Bronze coin of Octavian minted at an eastern mint. He was only 18 when Julius Caesar was killed and he looks young on this coin. The meaning of CA is unknown. RPC I 4103.

were divided between his grand-nephew Octavian (Figure 3) and his supporter Mark Antony (Figure 4). Octavian controlled Rome and the western regions while Mark Antony controlled the eastern regions. Their forces were considerable and included war galleys as well as land armies. With Octavian was Marcus Agrippa (Figure 5) who had been a suc-

cessful commander on land and sea. Mark Antony was joined by Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt, and issued a series of coins honouring his legions. They have war galleys on the obverse and legionary

standards on the reverse. (Figure 6) Below the prows of the galleys there are bronze rams (Figure 7) and at the top of the central standards there are gold eagles (Figure 8). Eventually Octavian



Figure 5 – A copper coin showing Marcus Agrippa wearing a crown decorated with the prows of warships. Neptune on the reverse holds a tiny dolphin on his hand. Agrippa was responsible for Octavian winning the naval battle of Actium in 31 BC. Sear 1812.



Figure 4 – Denarius of Mark Antony. He appears to have a broken nose which is not surprising for a Roman general. Also his recessed upper lip suggests that he is missing his front teeth. On the reverse there is a ram below a ship's prow. Sear 1472.



Figure 6 – Denarius of Mark Antony minted in 32 BC to honour his legions. On the obverse there is a war galley with rams at the front. On the reverse there is an aquila (a staff with an eagle on top) between legionary standards with LEG XII below. RSC 41.

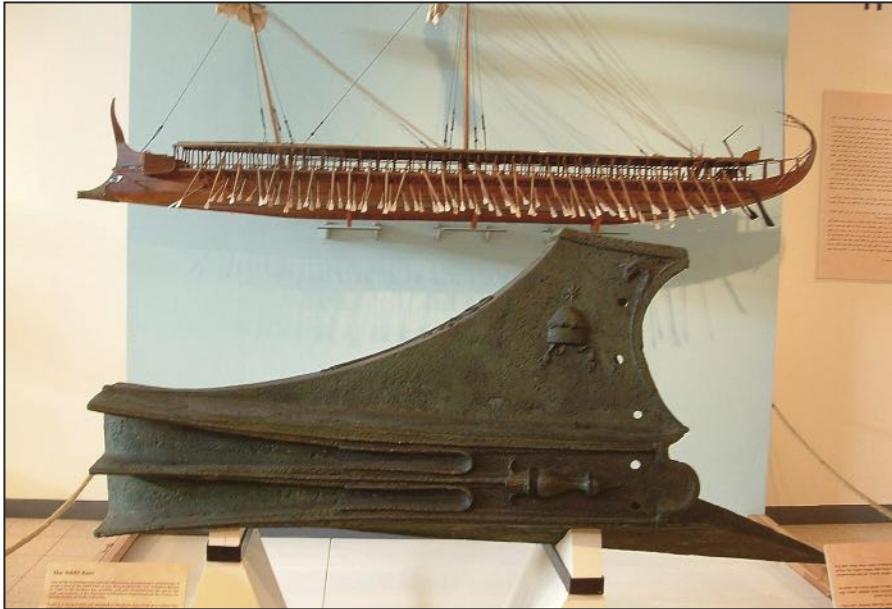


Figure 7 – A bronze ram discovered in the Mediterranean Sea and displayed in the Israeli National Naval Museum. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 8 – Replica of an eagle standard. (Wikimedia Commons)

and Mark Antony became enemies and in 31 BC Octavian won a decisive naval battle near Actium in Greece and became the sole ruler. In 27 BC the Roman Senate gave him the title 'Augustus', which was also claimed by his successors.

Augustus was a capable administrator and during his long reign order was established, the empire prospered and peace prevailed. This Roman peace (the Pax Romana) was necessary for the spread of Christianity, which began during the reign of Tiberius (14-37 AD). He was Augustus' son-in-law and successor. (Figure 9) Jesus was crucified in 30 AD and Christianity soon spread to Rome.

Augustus had expected to be succeeded by his grandsons, Gaius and Lu-



Figure 9 – Denarius of Tiberius minted in 15 AD. On the reverse he is in a quadriga (a 4-horse chariot) in a triumphal procession in Rome. He holds a branch and a staff with an eagle on the top. Sear 1762.



Figure 10 – Denarius of Augustus minted in 2 BC. He looks much older than in Figure 3. On the reverse between his grandsons are spears and shields with a lituus and a simpulum above. Sear 1597.



Figure 11 – A copper coin of Caligula with Vesta on the reverse. S and C stand for *Senatus Consulto* meaning 'by decree of the Senate'. Vesta was the goddess of the hearth. (Sear 1803)

cus (Figure 10), but they died in 4 AD and 2 AD respectively. Tiberius was succeeded by his grand-nephew Caligula (37-41 AD). He was only 24 when he became emperor and looks young on his coins. The second-century historian Suetonius described him as having a forehead that was "broad and forbidding", and although the coins show him with hair on his head Suetonius said he was bald. (Figure 11) Unfortunately Caligula suffered from mental illness and was a terrible emperor, cruel and irrational. When he was assassinated his uncle Claudius became emperor.

Claudius (41-54 AD) was a capable administrator but he probably had some form of physical disability. Suetonius

says he stumbled when he walked and had "a firm neck", which is a strange description. On his coins his neck does not look normal, being unusually long and thick. (Figure 12) He has a long neck on a marble bust in the Naples Museum. (Figure 13) Claudius is mentioned in the New Testament (Acts 11:28 and 18:2) and Suetonius says he expelled the Jews from Rome because of disturbances caused by Chrestus. Apparently Suetonius was referring to Christ and Christians.

Claudius was poisoned by his wife, Agrippina, and her son Nero became emperor. He was quite unsuitable as an emperor and was more interested in singing and playing the lyre. Even in

these areas he had no talent and Suetonius records that Vespasian, a leading general, got into trouble when he fell asleep during one of Nero's interminable recitals. Vespasian fled to a remote town and hid there until again being put in command of an army. On his coins Nero appears to be rather obese. (Figure 14) Suetonius says he had a squat neck and a protuberant belly and always had his hair set in rows of curls. The curls can be seen on his coins. Nero persecuted the Christians, which Suetonius described as "a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief." After the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD Nero blamed the Christians. Many were arrested and executed in horrible ways.



Figure 12 – A copper coin of Claudius with a Roman military officer on the reverse. The inscription means 'to the perseverance of the Augustus'. Sear 1858.

Tacitus, early in the second century, wrote, "Dressed in wild animals' skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight." Eventually Nero fell out of favour with the people and he committed suicide in 68 AD.

After Nero's demise there were briefly

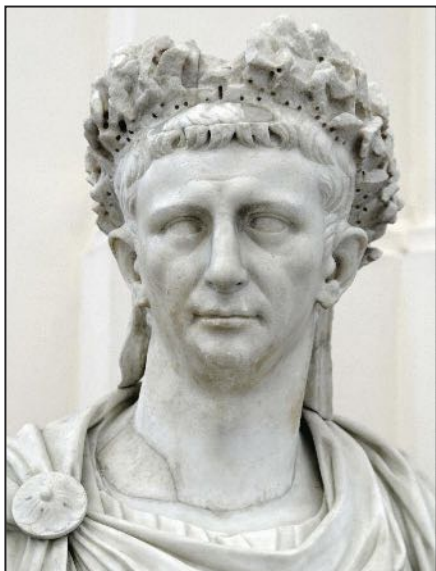


Figure 13 – Marble bust of Claudius in the Farnese Collection in the Naples National Archaeological Museum. It was made during his lifetime. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen)



Figure 14 – A billon tetradrachm of Nero minted at Alexandria in 66 AD. On the reverse dolphins swim beside the ship taking Nero to Greece for a tour. The Greek inscription means 'emperor bearer'. Sear 2009.

three emperors in succession. The first was Galba (68-9 AD). He was a general with a reputation as a stern disciplinarian, and on his coins he gives the impression of being a really tough man. (Figure 15) Then there was Otho (69 AD) who had quite a different character. He was not a military man and disliked fighting. On his coins he appears to be a gentle person. He has plenty of hair, but it was a wig. He was vain about his appearance and tried to conceal the thinness of his hair. The rows of curly hair in his wig can be seen on his coins. (Figure 16) Otho was succeeded by Vitellius (69 AD)

who was a general with a reputation for gluttony. On his coins he looks as if he likes his food. (Figure 17)

The next emperor was Vespasian (69-79 AD). He was the general who fell asleep during one of Nero's recitals. On his coins he appears as a down-to-earth, no-nonsense military man. (Figure 18) He had suppressed the Jewish revolt which began in 66 AD. In 70 AD his son Titus captured Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. Vespasian was a capable ruler and the stable environment allowed Christianity to spread all over the empire. He built the Colosseum and the Temple



Figure 15 – A silver tetradrachm of Galba minted at Antioch in Syria in 68 AD. On the reverse an eagle (symbol of Jupiter and Rome) stands on a thunderbolt. RPC 4195.



Figure 16 – Denarius of Otho minted at Rome in 69 AD. On the reverse Security personified as a woman holds a wreath. Sear 2162.



Figure 17 – Denarius of Vitellius minted at Rome in 69 AD. On the reverse a dolphin is above a cauldron which sits on a tripod with a crow beneath. These objects were of religious significance for Vitellius. Sear 2201.



Figure 18 – Brass sestertius of Vespasian. Although he looks serious on his coins he had a sense of humour and was quite witty. On the reverse Pax (Peace) holds a cornucopia and a branch. Sear 2330.



Figure 19 – A copper coin (an as) of Titus. On the reverse Pax holds an olive branch and a caduceus (a symbol of peace and prosperity). Sear 2549.

of Peace in Rome, and died of natural causes at the age of 69.

Titus succeeded his father in 79 AD, but only two months after his accession Mount Vesuvius erupted wiping out the towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Titus immediately provided disaster relief and visited the area soon after the eruption. During his father's reign he had been unpopular because of his love affair

with Berenice, the sister of the Jewish king Agrippa II. Titus and Berenice had lived together in Rome until Vespasian ordered him to send her away. Saint Paul had appeared before Agrippa and Berenice when he was a prisoner in Caesarea, as recorded in the New Testament (Acts 25 and 26). After the eruption of Vesuvius Titus became popular, but in 81 AD he developed a fever, prob-

ably from malaria, and died. Suetonius described him as being “handsome except for a certain paunchiness.” Because of his chubby face his appearance on coins has been described as “almost cherubic”. He certainly looks overweight. (Figure 19)

Titus was succeeded by his brother Domitian (81-96 AD). He was autocratic and cruel, but under his firm control law and order were maintained and the empire prospered. It is generally thought that the last book in the Bible, Revelation, was written during his reign, but some scholars consider it more likely that it was written shortly after the reign of Nero. In describing Domitian, Suetonius says, “Later he lost his hair and developed a paunch.” But on a dupondius minted in 92 AD he has plenty of hair. (Figure 20) Suetonius goes on to say, “He took as a personal insult any reference, joking or otherwise, to bald men, being extremely sensitive about his own baldness.” No doubt the die-engravers were too scared to show him without hair.

Domitian was arrogant and demanded to be addressed as ‘Lord and God’. Sadly he became paranoid and in 93 AD a reign of terror began. Many senators and officials were executed, and it is not surprising that he was assassinated in 96 AD.

After Domitian was assassinated the senators elected an elderly senator, Nerva (96-98 AD). His rule was benign: he abolished the system for collecting the tax imposed on Jews to support the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome and he started the first charity for poor children, but he was ugly and had a large nose. (Figure 21) His coins are easy to recognize even when very worn because of his nose. Four months before he died he nominated Trajan, the governor of Upper Germany, to be his successor.



Figure 20 – A brass dupondius of Domitian. On the reverse Virtus (bravery) personified as a woman holds a spear and a short sword and stands with her foot on a helmet. Sear 2798.



Figure 21 – A bronze coin of Nerva minted at Antioch in Syria.
On the reverse SC stands for Senatus Consulto meaning 'by decree of the senate'. RPC 3488.



Figure 22 – Map of the Roman Empire at its greatest extent. (Wikimedia Commons)

Trajan (98-117 AD) was a successful general and during his long reign the Roman Empire reached its greatest extent. (Figure 22 – map) He is always easy to recognize on coins because of his characteristic appearance: his large upper lip slightly overlaps his lower lip. (Figure 23)

All the coins shown in this article are in the exhibition. Each coin is in a coin-holder and attached by a ribbon to an A4-sized card. On the card there are enlarged photos of the coin and information about it. (Figure 24) Also in the exhibition there is a display of Roman items such as lamps, glass and fibulas (like big safety pins), and there are some sestertii (large brass coins) for people to hold in their hands. With the exhibition there is a PowerPoint presentation that gives a brief overview. Hopefully it will be a popular exhibition.

The Centre for Coins, Culture and Religious History Foundation operates as a special ministry of St John's Cathedral in Brisbane, and the dean of the cathedral is the chairman of the Board of Directors.

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Figure 23 – Denarius of Trajan minted at Rome in 108 AD.
On the reverse the goddess Roma holds Victory on her hand. Sear 3221.



Figure 24 – An information card with the coin attached.