

Coins and Conquest:  
Shift in imperial imagery on Trajan's Dacian and Parthian coinage

Roman Imperial coinage represented the perspectives of the elites in power, helping to broadly promote imperial policies and provide support for the glorification of the emperor (Elkins-2017). Coins serve as a “double message” as numismatist Carlos Noreña states, because not only were coins important pieces of economic value, but also held propagandistic value. (Noreña-2011). Looking into each emperor's coinage minting programmes allows a deeper dive into the ever-changing priorities and subsequent aims that each emperor and administration had, including goals which could remain the same or change with every successive emperor and dynasty. One theme that was retained across imperial coinage was that of victory. Each emperor would manipulate and transform this victory imagery according to the cultural beliefs and behavioral trends of Roman society, thus allowing for coinage to be an indicator for scholars to better understand not only the political situation under each emperor, but also the ideas and values which dominated Roman society at the time. During the period of Augustus, the iconographic visual personification of Parthia was created where, as C.B. Rose states, they were often portrayed as a bearded man, wearing trousers, and sometimes topped with a Phrygian cap; this was rare for the period as all other personifications of lands and peoples were depicted as female figures rather than a male one (Rose-2005).

For centuries, Parthia had been the most formidable enemy of Rome. In the Republic, the triumvir Crassus conducted a disastrous military campaign (53 B.C.) against the Parthians leading to his own death; Mark Antony also led his legions to total annihilation at the hands of the Parthian forces yet again in 34 B.C., thus leading to another humiliating defeat for Rome (Lightfoot-1990). The Parthian War (A.D. 115–117) was the first time Rome had decisively

defeated its most powerful rival, a major and unprecedented victory commemorated on coinage as an impressive feat for not only Rome, but for the emperor as well (Schlude-2020). The series of coinage minted to commemorate Trajan's victory over Parthia demonstrates a shift towards the emperor himself being the integral figure on the coinage, thus being linked synonymously with the victory rather than the state as well as depicting the Parthians in a more diplomatic yet brutal way. In contrast to this, his coinage minted to commemorate the conquest of Dacia showed a different and more traditional side of celebrating a military conquest over foreign peoples such as depictions of personifications of rivers, mourning conquered peoples, reused reverse types, and the typical Roman trophies. Dacians were often depicted by the Romans with long hair, bearded, wearing pants, a Phrygian hat, and often a falx (curved sword) (Grumeza-2009). This subsequent shift of intent and audience by Trajan from his traditional commemoration of the Dacian conquest to his uniquely revolutionary way in which he portrayed his Parthian victory on coinage set the standard for later emperors to continue to use and build upon in the centuries to come.

Overall, the political atmosphere at the time of Trajan's reign was one of changing ideologies, propaganda, and the subsequent evolution of the portrayal of the emperorship that would forever change the course of Roman imperial power for the remainder of its existence. Carlos Noreña states within his research that the use of personifications of the emperor's virtues on coinage began to increase during the reigns of Nerva and Trajan such as the introduction of *liberalitas* as a new virtue created solely for Trajan to express his own greatness and generosity to the people of Rome (Noreña-2001). Through the comparison of coinage programs and reverse designs by previous and later emperors to that of Trajan, this distinct break from the portrayal of generic virtues and victories reflecting the overall emperorship and or the state of Rome, was

then transformed into the military victories being used to emphasize the personal feats and glory of the emperor himself as well as specific virtues being ascribed to the emperor rather than generic ones. It would be during Trajan's reign that the distinct shift in imperial ideology to that of an increasing focus on the person of the emperor would become evident and embraced by Trajan as well as later emperors as emphasized through their coin minting programs. Further archaeological and numismatic research into this shift in Roman imperial ideals and imagery requires a deeper analysis through other sources of evidence like literature and archaeological evidence such as monuments and statues in order to dig deeper into this time period to more definitively argue for this revolutionary shift in imperial ideals and propaganda and to back up the argument that the study of coinage, can most accurately portray this momentous shift.

## Bibliography

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