



# Collecting Roman Coins



## Coin Types and Inscriptions



Roman coins have survived over 1,500 years in surprisingly large numbers and are relatively inexpensive.

The 'heads' side (*obverse*) of a Roman coin normally bears a portrait of the Emperor or of his wife or son with their names and titles. Early roman coins are renowned for the quality of their portraits. The 'tails' side (*reverse*) was used to give out a message, proclaiming the Emperor's virtues and achievements through various symbolic or more direct images. These include gods and goddesses (Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, etc), personifications of virtues (Peace, Fortune, etc.), military symbols (soldiers, standards, camp gates, etc.), personifications of countries (e.g . *Britannia* – pictured top right on a coin of Antoninus Pius), even animals (including the she-wolf with Romulus and Remus).

### Collecting coins

There are so many coins that it is wise to build up a collection on a limited theme. A few suggestions are:

- \*\*\* Emperors associated with Britain;
- \*\*\* Emperors of the family of the first Emperors – Augustus to Nero (an expensive option!)
- \*\*\* coins of the Adoptive Emperors - Trajan to Commodus (also quite expensive)
- \*\*\* a single type of reverse design (e.g. military) – see paragraph above;
- \*\*\* coins of a single type e.g. silver denarii – or (if you are worried about inflation), the double denarius or antoninianus which began as a silver coin but only 1½ times its weight, then (as inflation eroded its value) was issued as a silver alloy, then as bronze with a thin silver wash and finally as a bronze coin;
- \*\*\* a full range of early imperial coins from the same emperor - see opposite
- \*\*\* coins of Constantine I and his family – parents, 2 wives, 4 sons, nephews, commemoratives, etc. All bronze coins so relatively inexpensive, some easy to obtain, others hard to find.
- \*\*\* coins issued for Emperresses

### Selection and care of your coins

As with all coins, condition and clarity are all important, so choose the best example you can afford – but remember that you can always upgrade to a better coin at a later stage. Handle your coins as little as possible and try to hold them by the edges. Store and display them carefully so they do not rub against each other and, of course **never** clean or polish them.

You can buy (£1.95) a fully-illustrated guide to the Coins of the Roman Empire from

<http://payhip.com/johnhigham>

[www.hadriancoins.co.uk](http://www.hadriancoins.co.uk)

### Coin Types - 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD

The smallest coin was the copper **QUADRANS**. A *quadrans* was the *Widow's Mite* of the Bible.

The next coin was a copper **AS** (c 25 mm) which was worth four copper **QUADRANTES**.

A brass **DUPONDIUS** (the same size as the *as*) was worth two *asi*. Usually the Emperor was shown wearing a radiate crown on this coin (instead of a laurel wreath) to help distinguish it from the similar sized *As*, though they were also different colours - yellow brass, reddish copper.

A brass **SESTERTIUS** (30-35 mm) was worth two *dupondii*. The *sestertius* was the denomination the romans used to express large values - e.g. land or property values. When the Senate offered the Imperial Crown to the highest bidder, the winning bid was for 25,000 *sestertii* for each senator.

A silver **DENARIUS** (17-18 mm) was worth 4 *sestertii*, 8 *dupondii* or 16 *asi*. A legionary soldier was paid 300 *denarii* and a centurion was paid 3000 *denarii* a year but half of this was kept back as payment for food and clothing, so a *denarius* was probably the equivalent of a £20 note in today's money and a *sestertius* about £5.

Later on, as inflation began to bite, a silver **ANTONINIANUS** was issued - in value a *double denarius* but it only contained 1½ as much silver! *Antoniniani* are distinguished by the radiate crown on the Emperor's portrait (instead of the normal laurel wreath). For Emperresses, the symbol was a crescent behind the neck.

A gold *Aureus* was worth 25 *denarii*/

### Inscriptions on the coins - 1st - 3rd centuries

The following are the most common inscriptions on the obverse (heads) side, the titles being often abbreviated. The Emperors titles always include **Imperator** (**IMP** = Commander-in-Chief), the most important title and **Augustus** (**AVG** = 'revered one' - the title given to the first Emperor). They might also include some or all of the following: **Caesar** (the title later given to the Emperor's son or heir), **Pontifex Maximus** (**PM** = Head Priest), **Tribunica Potestas** \* (**TR P** = Tribunal Power - protector of the people), **Consul** \*(**COS** = Chief Magistrate), **Pater Patriae** (**PP** = Father of his Country) . The two titles starred were renewed from time to time and are often followed by a number which is a help to dating. The lesser titles can appear on either side of the coins. **DIVUS** (male) or **DIVA** (female) before the name indicates that the coin is a commemorative, issued after his/her death.

### Coin Types - 3rd and 4th centuries AD

This was a time of increasing inflation as the government had to mint more and more money to pay the soldiers of a larger and larger army needed to defend the Empire's frontiers. In the third century, *Antoniniani* were still issued but contained less and less silver until they were made of bronze with a wash of silver. Smaller bronze coins were also issued. In the later 3rd and 4th centuries various attempts were made to reform the coinage and new types of coins were issued. Their names and values are not always clear but the reverse (tails side) often have interesting designs. Modern coin dealers classify them by size AE1 (the largest) to AE 4 (the smallest).

### Inscriptions on the coins

Whereas **Imperator** (= Commander-in-Chief) was the most important title for the early Emperors, this was gradually replaced by **Dominus Noster** (= Our Lord which was normally abbreviated to **DN**) from the early 4th century. Emperors who adopted this form, usually also included **PF** after their names (for **Pius Felix** = Dutiful and Fortunate). **Augustus** (abbreviated to **AVG**) was reserved for the senior Emperor and Caesar (**CAES** or **NOB C**) for the junior Emperor. To make these titles plural (where the Empire was divided into spheres of influence, e.g. East and West) an extra final letter was added to the abbreviation **AVGG** or **CAESS** or **DD NN**.