

THE FIRST MONETARY ISSUE FOR IMPERATOR MARCUS AURELIUS

Corneliu Bogdan Nicolae Beldianu*

Abstract

This article presents what are believed to be the first coins struck for emperor Marcus Aurelius. For a long period of time the first monetary issues attributed to Marcus Aurelius as Emperor were believed to be the coins with representation of the goddess Concordia on the reverse. In fact, coins with this kind of reverse representation are related to the dual rule of the empire by Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. The first coins identified for Marcus Aurelius show on the reverse the emperor standing alone and holding the globe in his right hand. This monetary issues were, most likely, struck between the time Marcus Aurelius was confirmed as Emperor and the time Lucius Verus was himself made Emperor, a very short period of time, thus making such coins extremely rare. Five such coins were identified until now, all of the denarii, one at an auction and the other four in two private collections.

Key words: Marcus Aurelius, monetary issues of Marcus Aurelius, Roman Empire, denarius.

Harold Mattingly, as he acknowledges in the opening of the talk about the chronology of monetary issues for Marcus Aurelius, has satisfactorily solved almost all the chronological problems of monetary issues struck in the name of this emperor (BMC IV CIX). The cataloging of monetary issue in BMC kept the order from RIC, with the monetary issues being presented in chronological order, each in part, but ordered alphabetically, taking into account to the legend the from reverse.

Obviously, the chosen solution was honorable for that time (the first half of the 20th century), but at the present level of numismatic studies it has obvious limitations.

Thus, according to RIC III and BMC IV, the first monetary issues for Marcus Aurelius as Emperor are classified as those having (on the reverse) the representation of Concordia ("Concordia, draped, seated left on low seat, holding *patera* in extended right hand and resting left elbow on statuette of Spes: under seat, a *cornucopiae*"), with the legend: CONCORD(IA/IAE) AVG(VSTOR) TR P XV COS III (RIC III no. 1-6). The reverse of this monetary issue is an abstraction by personification (Concordia) of a historical fact: the association of Marcus Aurelius with his adoptive brother, Lucius Verus, to the rule of the empire (ever since its appointment by the senate as an emperor). But could a Roman imperial coin illustrate a personification of a such historical fact before it was explicitly communicated? Logic and other previous examples say no.

Then what was the first monetary issue struck for Emperor Marcus Aurelius? In order to answer this question, we need to look at the monetary issues for this emperor in relation to the known historical facts.

The moment when Marcus Aurelius, who previously had the title of Caesar, was given the title of Emperor (and the effective leadership of the empire) is reported by one of the most important works for the biographies of the Roman emperors: „*Historia Augusta*”. The resumption here of fragments relevant, to the issue in question, from these works can only be welcomed. Thus, first time the *Historia Augusta* speaks of the moment of the transfer of power to Marcus Aurelius is placed at the end of Antoninus Pius's

* Romanian Numismatic Society, Bucharest.

E-mail: beldianub@yahoo.com

biography: “(Antoninus Pius) after he had eaten too freely some Alpine cheese at dinner he vomited during the night, and was taken with a fever the next day. On the second day, as he saw that his condition was becoming worse, in the presence of his prefects he committed the state and his daughter to Marcus Antoninus, and gave orders that the golden statue of Fortune, which was wont to stand in the bed-chamber of the emperor, be given to him. Then he gave the watchword to the officer of the day as *Equanimity*, and so, turning as if to sleep, gave up the ghost at Lorium” (HA, Antoninus Pius 12).

In the biography dedicated to Marcus Aurelius in the *Historia Augusta*, the story of the moment is resumed a bit more detailed and continued with the following details: “Being forced by the Senate to assume the government of the state after the death of the Deified Pius, Marcus made his brother his colleague in the empire, giving him the name Lucius Aurelius Verus Cornmodus and bestowing on him the titles Caesar and Augustus. Then they began to rule the state on equal terms (...)” (HA, Marcus Antoninus VII 3-5).

According to the chronology of the facts presented in this ancient work, we can outline the order of the emergence of monetary issues for emperor Marcus Aurelius. A very rare series of monetary issues (RIC III no. 30-32), from year 161 AD (with the legend of obverse: IMP CAES M AVREL ANTONINVS AVG), presents the new emperor as the world's leader: standing alone (!) and holding the globe in the right hand (reverse legend: TR POT XV COS III). These monetary issues, which present only Marcus Aurelius (in his new capacity as Emperor) are most likely, struck until the moment when the Senate confirms Lucius Verus as the second ruler of the empire. Several arguments can be put forward in support of this affirmation. The time elapsed between the moment when Antoninus Pius transfers the power of Marcus Aurelius and the one in which he forces the Senate to confirm the rule of the empire for himself and for his stepbrother Lucius Verus is very short. The rarity of issues RIC III no. 30-32 becomes an argument that these are the first monetary issues for Marcus Aurelius (after was confirmed as Emperor by Antoninus Pius, but before Lucius Verus confirmed officially by Senate).

How rare are these monetary issues? The answer is unequivocal: extremely rare. Large public collections do not have registered, in the online database (OCRE), any coin from this issues. The main numismatic auction database (acsearch.info) is the only one to provide information and photographs belonging to a coin from issue RIC III no. 31, auctioned at “Auktionshaus H.D. Rauch GmbH” in 2011 (Auction no. 89, from 5 December 2011, lot. 1656). Another coin from issue RIC III no. 31, but also two unpublished specimens of the same series, come from a private collection¹. Also, from another private collection comes the fifth coin with this type of reverse, but with an obverse different from that of the coins from the first private collection mentioned. The extremely small number of coins struck from these issues, the „emperor alone with the globe”, is also apparent from the fact that the five coins (presented in the catalog at the end of this material) are made with four obverse dies and only three dies for reverse.



Fig. 1 - The reverse which shows for the first time Marcus Aurelius in his stateliness as Emperor.

¹ We also thank the owner (from forumancientcoins.com) for his courtesy, giving us the photos of the coins for be used in this material.

The association of Lucius Verus with equal titles and rights (Imperator, Augustus etc.) and the confirmation of this by the Senate, made it necessary to strike identical monetary issue for both emperors. This explains the appearance of the monetary issue RIC III, no. 457 for Lucius Verus, with this emperor on the reverse represented in a similar fashion to Marcus Aurelius (on the above-mentioned monetary issue): standing alone and holding the globe in his right hand. This it can also be considered the first monetary issue for Lucius Verus. However, the separate representation (on the coins) of the two emperors could create confusions, confusions which, in turn, could have serious political and social repercussions. Therefore, the production of the issue „emperor alone, holding the globe” coins was immediately stopped (hence their rarity) and was replaced by new types of monetary issues which make known to the world the new bicephal leadership of the empire, but in a two different ways (depending on the nominal). Thus, on the reverse of the aureus, sestertius, dupondius and aes issues, the two emperors are represented standing left and right, facing each other, clasping their right hands, the image being accompanied by the legend “CONCORDIAE AVGVSTOR (...)”².



Fig. 2 - The reverse of aureus an (left) and a denarius (right) illustrating the union “concordia” between Marcus Aurelius and his associate Lucius Verus.

At the same time the denarius issues are struck denarius issues, on the reverse of which the bicephal leadership of the empire is represented abstracted, through the image of the goddess Concordia and the legend: “CONCORD(IA) AVGVSTOR”³. This aspect is very interesting for studying the monetary communication of information in the Roman Empire, for the form of the message according to the target audience⁴.

On the aureus coins (which were addressed to the patricians, to the upper class, and Provincial Army leaders), as well as on the common metal coins (primarily addressed to the people of the capital of the empire), the bicephal (dual) leadership of the roman state is explicitly presented by the representation of the two emperors, clasping their hands. But on denarius coins, which were mainly used to pay the army in the provinces, but also for stipendia or foreign trade, the dual leadership is communicated abstracted, through the representation of the goddess Concordia.

Certainly all of these findings are very interesting and they show that the study of imperial Roman coins, struck for emperor Marcus Aurelius, is far from over.

² This monetary type had a two-year issuance period, being struck in 161 and 162 AD, as shown by the legend of the reverse which specifies fifteenth and sixteenth tribune power for Marcus Aurelius (CONCORDIAE AVGVSTOR TR P XV / TR P XVI COS III).

³ Denari of this type were struck for a longer period, 161-163 AD, as shown by the tribune power mentioned in the reverse legend (TR POT XV-XVII).

⁴ The study of the monetary message and the target audience according to the nominal currency of the Roman currency is still at the beginning. For this discussion, see Hekster 2003.

CATALOG

1. Denarius, AR, 3.16 g.

Ob. Head of Marcus Aurelius, laureate, right. IMP CAES M AVREL ANTONINVS AVG

Rv. Marcus Aurelius, togate, standing left, holding globe in extended right hand and in left hand holding roll at side. TR POT XV COS III

RIC III 31.

Coin sold by „Auktionshaus H. D. Rauch GmbH”.



2. Denarius, AR.

Ob. Head of Marcus Aurelius, laureate, right. IMP CAES M AVREL ANTONINVS AVG

Rv. Marcus Aurelius, togate, standing left, holding globe in extended right hand and in left hand holding roll at side. TR POT XV COS III

RIC III 31; BMC - .

Struck with the same dies like coin number 1.

The first private collection.



3. Denarius, AR.

Ob. Bust of Marcus Aurelius, laureate, draped, right. IMP CAES M AVREL ANTONINVS AVG

Rv. Marcus Aurelius, togate, standing left, holding globe in extended right hand and in left hand holding roll at side. TR POT XV COS III

RIC III - ; BMC - .

The first private collection.



4. Denarius, AR.

Ob. Bust of Marcus Aurelius, bare-headed, right, with drapery on left shoulder, front and back. IMP CAES M AVREL ANTONINVS AVG

Rv. Marcus Aurelius, togate, standing left, holding globe in extended right hand and in left hand holding roll at side. TR POT XV COS III

RIC III - ; BMC - .

The first private collection.



5. Denarius, AR ↓ 3.01g; 17.7 mm.

Ob. Bust of Marcus Aurelius, bare-headed, right, draped, cuirassed, right. IMP CAES M AVREL ANTONINVS AVG

Rv. Marcus Aurelius, togate, standing left, holding globe in extended right hand and in left hand holding roll at side. TR POT XV COS III

RIC III - ; BMC - .

The same reverse dies like coin number 4.

The second private collection.



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Resurse web

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