



Aureus depicting the head of Trajan and the same extending his hand to children (103-111 CE)

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[1]

Denomination: Aureus

Date: 103 CE to 111 CE

Material: gold

Mint: Rome

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): British Museum. R.7566.

Name of Ruler: Trajan

Obverse (Image and Inscription):

Image: Laureate, draped, and cuirassed bust of Trajan looking to right

Inscription: IMP TRAIANO AVG GER DAC P M TR P

Reverse (Image and Inscription):

Image: Trajan, togate, standing left, holding roll in left hand, extending right hand towards boy and girl

Inscription: COS V PP S P Q R OPTIMO PRINC // ALIM ITAL

Weight (g): 7.11g

Commentary:

RIC II, Trajan, no. 93, p. 250 (var. cuirassed bust).

This *aureus* was minted between 103 and 111 CE (the legend actually refers to Trajan as COS V, and we know that he became consul for the fifth time in 103 CE and for the sixth time in 112 CE). It depicts on the obverse the head of Trajan, and on the reverse the emperor extending his hand to children. The inscription on the obverse and reverse of the coin celebrates Trajan as imperator, Augustus, Germanicus, Dacicus, *pontifex maximus*, holder of the *tribunicia potestas*, consul for the fifth time, *pater patriae* (father of the fatherland), and *optimus princeps*, or best ruler. The scene depicted on the reverse and the legend ALIM(enta) ITAL(iae), which can be translated as “the alimentary foundations of Italy,” show that this coin had been minted in order to commemorate one aspect of Trajan’s action in favour of the children of the *plebs*.

Before analysing this coin, it is important to make some general remarks about the different food or cash donations that existed during the imperial period, and the policy led by Trajan in that domain. To deal with this question the panegyric of Trajan, which is a longer and more elaborated version of the speech that Pliny the Younger addressed to Trajan in 100 CE in order to thank the emperor on the occasion of Pliny’s accession to the suffect consulship, is an important source. In § 25-28, Pliny enumerates the donations accomplished by Trajan when he became emperor. We learn that he offered a *congarium*, that is an exceptional cash donation. The persons who received the *congarium* were: members of the *plebs frumentaria*, that is male adult citizens who lived in Rome or who came from Rome and were registered on a list that granted them the right to receive for free a monthly ration of public grain (they probably represented between 150 000 and 200 000 citizens during the imperial period, see Lo Cascio, “Le procedure,” p. 23-58); persons who were allowed to take part exceptionally in the *frumentationes* (monthly distributions of free grain); and also some categories of the population that were not part of the *plebs frumentaria*, such as some children (Virilouvet, “Les difficultés,” p. 264, n. 10). In § 25 Pliny praises Trajan for having divided equally the *congarium*, but also for having been attentive that all the peoples who were eligible could receive their own share (note that a second *congarium* took place in 103 CE, after the first Dacian War, and a third after the second Dacian war, possibly in 107 CE; Lamotte, “L’œuvre de Trajan,” p. 189, n. 4). In the passage of the



panegyric in which Pliny deals with the *congarium* the author adds that thanks to his *liberalitas* the emperor sought, found, and registered (*adscivit*) 5000 children. These 5000 children were male children, sons of Roman citizens from the *Urbs* who had thus been granted the privilege to receive exceptionally the *congarium* of 99 CE (other emperors such as Augustus had in the past also granted some children this kind of right), but also to benefit from the *frumentationes* probably up to the age of their maturity when they may have been integrated among the *plebs frumentaria* for their whole life – this second point was a novelty (on the status of these 5000 children see Lamotte, “L’œuvre,” p. 193-218; Virlouvvet, *La plèbe frumentaire*, p. 74-79). Finally, it is important to note that the members of the *plebs* who benefitted from the *frumentationes* were not indigent persons. The citizens who were part of the *plebs frumentaria* were modest citizens but they were integrated into the social and economical life of the *Urbs*. To take part in the *frumentationes* was first of all the privilege of the Roman citizen (see Virlouvvet, *La plèbe frumentaire*, p. 43-82).

However, Trajan’s actions in favour of the *plebs* were not limited to the citizens and the children living in the *Urbs*. During his reign he also decided to support some social groups living in Italy, and especially children, thanks to the creation of *alimenta*. It is the creation of these Italian *alimenta* by Trajan which is advertised and recalled in the coin presented here, as in various emissions minted in 103-111 CE and then in 112-114 CE. These various emissions bear on their reverse: a representation of Trajan standing and extending his arms towards two children (as is the case with the coin presented here and with RIC II, Trajan, no. 230, p. 259), a representation of *Abundantia* or of *Annona* holding ears of corns and cornucopia and having at their feet one child holding a roll (RIC II, Trajan, no. 243, p. 261; no. 459, p. 277; no. 604-605, p. 286-287); a representation of *Abundantia* stepping right (RIC II, Trajan, no. 606, p. 287); or a representation of Trajan seated, holding a sceptre and having before him a woman holding a child and with another child at her feet (RIC II, Trajan, no. 460-462, p. 278). All these coins have in common the legend ALIMENTA ITALIAE on their reverse (about these coins, see Lo Cascio, “*Alimenta Italiae*,” p. 287-288, who also associates them with other emissions bearing on their reverse the legend ITALIA RESTITUTA and depicting Trajan gesturing a personified *Italia* who is represented kneeling, holding globe, and escorted by two children).

The *alimenta* were alimentary foundations, that could be private or public, and whose aim was to provide livelihood to impoverished and/or weak persons (for examples of private foundations, see Lamotte, “L’œuvre,” p. 191, n. 12). Concerning the *alimenta* in Italy, it is highly probable that they started to be instituted under the reign of Nerva (mentioned in *Epitome de Caesaribus* XII.4; see Lo Cascio, “*Alimenta Italiae*,” p. 287, n. 2). Trajan then continued and developed this system. He created Italian *alimenta* that were aimed at children only. These Italian *alimenta* were based on a system in which the *fiscus* granted loans to some voluntary Italian landowners under the condition that their lands were subject to a mortgage. In general, for each landowner the amount of the loan was about 8% of the stated value of his land, and the landowner had to pay to the city interest of 5% per year. It was this interest of 5% that formed the income that was granted by the municipalities to the children that were considered to have priority to receive it. The functioning of the Italian *alimenta* is known thanks to two alimentary tables of the reign of Trajan: the table of the [Ligures Baebiani](#) [2] (CIL IX, 1455 = ILS 6509; about this inscription see the two articles of Veyne, “La table des *Ligures Baebiani*” and [Trajan and the ‘tabula alimentaria’ \(CIL IX, 1455\)](#) [3]) and the table from [Veleia](#) [4] (CIL XI, 1147 = ILS 6675; about this inscription see Criniti, *La tabula alimentaria*) (more generally on the functioning of the Italian *alimenta* see Duncan-Jones, “The Purpose”; Lo Cascio, “*Alimenta Italiae*”; Lamotte, “L’œuvre,” p. 191-192, n. 14). Even if the social status of these Italian children remains debated, one essential condition that they had to fulfil was to be of free status, and their parents had to be part of the civic body of these Italian cities. It has been estimated that the amount of money that was granted per year to these Italian children who benefitted from these *alimenta* must have been less than around 200 *sestertii*, an amount of money that was relatively modest. Therefore, these *alimenta* may have been granted to the children who came from impoverished families (Lamotte, “L’œuvre,” p. 212). The amount of money granted to these Italian children can be estimated thanks to the alimentary table from Veleia that shows that the total of the interest received at Veleia was 55 800 sesterces, a total that was then distributed among 263 boys, 35 girls, and two illegitimate children. The boys received 16 sesterces a month, the girls 12, and the illegitimate children 12 and 10 respectively (see Criniti, *La tabula alimentaria*, p. 261). It has been recalled by Elio Lo Cascio that more than 50 cities are attested as having been involved in this programme, which represents slightly more than 10% of all the cities of the Italian peninsula. These numbers thus show that this alimentary programme had a large scope and probably concrete consequences regarding the helping of some impoverished groups living in Italian cities (Lo Cascio, “*Alimenta Italiae*,” p. 310). In addition, Lo Cascio remarks that many *alimenta* attested in Italy are concentrated in central Italy, that is in the area located closest to Rome; a geographical repartition that can be interpreted as showing that some Italian *alimenta* could have been created in order to improve the agricultural production in these regions with the aim of improving Rome’s supply (see the map in Duncan-Jones, “The Purpose,” p. 125; Lo Cascio, “*Alimenta Italiae*,” p. 305-307).

This leads to a point that has been very debated between scholars, namely: what could Trajan’s main purpose



have been when he created the Italian *alimenta*? As H el ene Lamotte has rightly recalled, it is erroneous to compare these Italian *alimenta* with the *frumentationes* and other alimentary foundations at Rome. Each of these foundations was different in its functioning, as they had been created in very different economical and social contexts (Lamotte, "L' uvre," p. 212, 217). The scholars who have tried to explain what could have been the main aim of the creation of the Italian *alimenta* are divided between those who think that what mattered the most was the loans granted to the landowners, and those who think that it was the payment of subsidies to the children. The Italian *alimenta* have thus been often interpreted as being Trajan's response to an agricultural and/or demographic crisis that would have affected the Italian peninsula (for the historiography on that question, see Lo Cascio, "*Alimenta Italiae*," p. 297-298). Without using the term crisis, Elio Lo Cascio has recalled that from the period of stabilisation that represented the *pax Augusta* onwards, Italy could not attract as many riches from the rest of the world as had been the case before that time. As a consequence, during the whole first century CE the population of Italy may have suffered from a progressive and diffuse impoverishment, a situation that may have caused a demographic slowdown. Trajan may have decided to create the Italian *alimenta* in order to counter this endemic demographic and economic decline and to revitalise agricultural production, especially via the granting of loans to landowners (Lo Cascio, "*Alimenta Italiae*," p. 302-306, 310-312). Finally, for Elio Lo Cascio it is no coincidence that Trajan, who was the first emperor of provincial origin, decided to support Italy through the alimentary programme. Trajan must have understood that it was politically and economically crucial to re-establish a more balanced relationship between the historical centre of the Empire, namely Italy, and the provinces (Lo Cascio, "*Alimenta Italiae*," p. 312). The fact that around 105 CE Trajan ordered that all the senators, and especially the senators who were of provincial origin, had to invest at least a third of their fortune in Italian lands took part in the same agenda (see Pliny the Younger, *Letters* VI.19). Thus, aside from the fact that these coins remembering the settlement of the *alimentae Italiae* or announcing the fact that Italy had been restored (*restituta*) highlight some qualities of the *optimus princeps*, such as his generosity and his ability to act with his subjects as their father, they may have taken part into a broader programme in which Trajan wanted to reassert the pre-eminence of Italy over the rest of the Empire.

Keywords in the original language:

- [imperator](#) [5]
- [optimus princeps](#) [6]
- [Senatus Populusque Romanus](#) [7]
- [Augustus](#) [8]
- [Germanicus](#) [9]
- [Dacicus](#) [10]
- [pontifex maximus](#) [11]
- [tribunicia potestas](#) [12]
- [consul](#) [13]
- [pater patriae](#) [14]
- [alimenta Italiae](#) [15]

Thematic keywords:

- [Trajan](#) [16]
- [father \(emperor as\)](#) [17]
- [imperial generosity](#) [18]
- [Italy](#) [19]
- [alimentary foundation](#) [20]
- [prosperity](#) [21]
- [children](#) [22]
- [Roman citizenship](#) [23]

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