



## Denarius depicting the head of Severus Alexander and the emperor symbolically depicted as the ruler of the orbis terrarum (224-225 CE)

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[1]

**Denomination:**

Denarius

**Date:** 224 CE to 225 CE

**Material:**

Silver

**Mint:**

Rome

**Name of Ruler:**

Severus Alexander

**Obverse (Image and Inscription):**

Image: Laureate, draped bust of Severus Alexander looking right

Inscription: IMP C M AVR SEV ALEXAND AVG

**Reverse (Image and Inscription):**

Image: Severus Alexander standing left, holding globe and spear, and wearing a turreted crown

Inscription: PM TR P III COS PP

**Commentary:**

(RIC IVb, Severus Alexander, no. 44c, p. 74)

This denarius, minted in Rome between 224 and 225 CE, depicts on the obverse the laureate head of Severus Alexander, and on the reverse the emperor standing wearing a turreted crown, and holding in his hand a globe and a spear, which symbolize the domination of the *orbis terrarum* (the entire world), otherwise known as the *oikoumenè* (the Greek term for civilised world), and is symbolic of the hegemony of Rome over the known world. The inscription on the obverse, "IMP C M AVR SEV ALEXAND AVG," refers to the emperor as *imperator*, Caesar, Marcus Aurelius Severus Alexander, Augustus, and the inscription on the reverse, "PM TR P III COS PP," acknowledges him as *pontifex maximus*, or high priest of the Roman state religion, holder of the *tribunicia potestas*, consul, and *pater patriae*, or father of the fatherland.

This issue was minted in the first years of the new emperor's reign. Marcus Aurelius Severus Alexander, born in 208 CE at Arca Caesarea, was the son of Marcus Julius Gessius Marcianus, an equestrian, and Julia Avita Mamaea. The latter was the sister of Julia Soemias, the mother of the future emperor Elagabalus, and the daughter of Julia Maesa, the sister of Julia Domna, the wife of Septimius Severus. Severus Alexander and his mother followed Elagabalus to Rome after his proclamation as emperor, and in 221 CE Julia Maesa was successful in convincing Elagabalus, by then more and more unpopular for his extravagances, to appoint the young Severus



Alexander as his heir, with the title of Caesar. Once emperor, Severus Alexander assumed the traditional imperial titles, as made clear by the present denarius. The title *pontifex maximus* in this framework assumes an important significance, as the young emperor restored and upheld the traditional values and gods of the Roman public cults, contrary to his predecessor Elagabalus, who introduced the cult of Elagabalus, the solar god of Emesa (see [Antoninianus depicting the head of Elagabalus and the emperor offering a sacrifice in front of the quadriga carrying the god of Emesa \(219-220 CE\)](#) [2]; [Aureus depicting the head of Elagabalus and a quadriga, bearing the Stone of Emesa \(218-219 CE\)](#) [3]). Moreover, the name Marcus Aurelius serves to associate the emperor with the previous rulers of the prestigious Antonine dynasty. In this respect, the young emperor followed the policy of his Severan predecessors, who liked to emphasize their association with the previous dynasty.

Turning to the imagery on the reverse of the coin, the depiction of the emperor holding the globe goes back to the time of Augustus. This iconography mirrored that of Zeus-Jupiter (Jupiter being the Roman equivalent of the Greek god Zeus), the king of the gods, who ruled the celestial sphere. Therefore, this iconography emphasized the emperor's standing as the ruler of the earth, as the earthly counterpart of the Olympian-Capitoline god (for example, a first century statue of Augustus commissioned after his death depicted him seated holding a spear and globe, and according to Josephus, *Jewish Wars* I.414, *Jewish Antiquities* XV.339, was based on a statue of Zeus the Olympian made by Phidias, a Greek sculptor from the fifth century BCE). Indeed, the turreted crown that the emperor is depicted as wearing on the reverse of this denarius is part of a broader *orbis terrarum* iconography that is quite similar to, and probably stemmed from the depiction of the famous statue of the Tyche of Antioch (see <http://museum.classics.cam.ac.uk/collections/casts/tyche-antioch> [4] and also the commentary on [Lucan, \*The Civil War\* I.183-203](#) [5] for the Roman adoption of her). This Hellenistic sculpture, which depicted a woman wearing a turreted crown, portrayed the personification of the city of Antioch (see also [Sestertius depicting the head of Hadrian and the same raising a kneeling personification of the Orbis Terrarum, or the entire world \(123 CE\)](#) [6]).

It is interesting to try to understand why Severus Alexander chose this posture. The first years of the young emperor's reign were quite difficult. Although the frontiers were at peace, Rome was in a situation of disadvantage vis-à-vis Sassanid Persia and the German tribes, who were collected on the borders. Moreover, at the beginning of his rule the emperor had to devalue the denarius, and so it was thus necessary to reaffirm the standing of the new emperor and emphasize that he was still the ruler of the world, despite the problems that the empire was facing. The globe, which symbolized Rome's rule over the entire *oikoumenè*, was probably adopted by the young emperor to forward a message of self-confidence and security, particularly to the army, as denarii were often used to pay the soldiers. Thus, the presence of the spear, a militaristic symbol, in the emperor's hand could convey the idea that the emperor was ready to defend its right to rule over the known world, if necessary by force.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Augustus](#) [7]
- [imperator](#) [8]
- [tribunicia potestas](#) [9]
- [Caesar](#) [10]
- [consul](#) [11]
- [pater patriae](#) [12]
- [pontifex maximus](#) [13]

Thematic keywords:

- [Severus Alexander](#) [14]
- [oikoumenè](#) [15]
- [Roman hegemony](#) [16]
- [Roman rule](#) [17]
- [universalism](#) [18]



- [globe](#) [19]
- [spear](#) [20]
- [crown](#) [21]

**Bibliographical references:** Noreña, Carlos F., *Imperial Ideals in the Roman West: Representation, Circulation, Power* [22] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)

Southern, Patricia, *The Roman Empire from Severus to Constantine* [23] (London: Routledge, 2001)

**Other sources connected with this document:** Numismatic item

### [Aureus depicting the head of Didius Julianus and the same symbolically depicted as the ruler of the orbis terrarum \(193 CE\) \[24\]](#)

- [Read more about Aureus depicting the head of Didius Julianus and the same symbolically depicted as the ruler of the orbis terrarum \(193 CE\) \[24\]](#)

Numismatic item

### [Sestertius depicting the head of Hadrian and the same raising a kneeling personification of the Orbis Terrarum, or the entire world \(119-121 CE\) \[25\]](#)

- [Read more about Sestertius depicting the head of Hadrian and the same raising a kneeling personification of the Orbis Terrarum, or the entire world \(119-121 CE\) \[25\]](#)

Numismatic item

### [Aureus depicting the head of Elagabalus and a quadriga, bearing the Stone of Emesa \(218-219 CE\) \[26\]](#)

- [Read more about Aureus depicting the head of Elagabalus and a quadriga, bearing the Stone of Emesa \(218-219 CE\) \[26\]](#)

Numismatic item

### [Antoninianus depicting the head of Elagabalus and the emperor offering a sacrifice in front of the quadriga carrying the god of Emesa \(219-220 CE\) \[27\]](#)

- [Read more about Antoninianus depicting the head of Elagabalus and the emperor offering a sacrifice in front of the quadriga carrying the god of Emesa \(219-220 CE\) \[27\]](#)

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- [2] <http://judaism-and-rome.cnrs.fr/antoninianus-depicting-head-elagabalus-and-emperor-offering-sacrifice-front-quadriga-carrying-god>
- [3] <http://judaism-and-rome.cnrs.fr/aureus-depicting-head-elagabalus-and-quadriga-bearing-stone-emesa-218-219-ce>
- [4] <http://museum.classics.cam.ac.uk/collections/casts/tyche-antioch>
- [5] <http://judaism-and-rome.cnrs.fr/lucan-civil-war-i183-203>
- [6] <http://judaism-and-rome.cnrs.fr/sestertius-depicting-head-hadrian-and-same-raising-kneeling-personification-orbis-terrarum-or-entire>
- [7] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/augustus>
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- [15] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/oikoumen%C3%A8>
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- [23] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/roman-empire-severus-constantine>
- [24] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/aureus-depicting-head-didius-julianus-and-same-symbolically-depicted-ruler-orbis-terrarum-193-ce>
- [25] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/sestertius-depicting-head-hadrian-and-same-raising-kneeling-personification-orbis-terrarum-or-entire>
- [26] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/aureus-depicting-head-elagabalus-and-quadriga-bearing-stone-emesa-218-219-ce>
- [27] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/antoninianus-depicting-head-elagabalus-and-emperor-offering-sacrifice-front-quadriga-carrying-god>
- [28] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/erc-team/samuele-rocca>