



Aurelianus depicting the head of Aurelian and a woman presenting a wreath to Aurelian restitutor orbis (274-275 CE)

Antoninianus depicting the head of Aurelian and a woman presenting a wreath to Aurelian who bears the title restitutor orbis.jpg



[1]

Denomination: aurelianus

Date: 274 CE to 275 CE

Material: silver

Mint: Serdica

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): British Museum; Museum number: 1950,1006.543

Name of Ruler: Aurelian

Obverse (Image and Inscription):

Image: Radiate and cuirassed bust of Aurelian looking right

Inscription: AVRELIANVS AVG(ustus)

Reverse (Image and Inscription):

Image: Woman standing right, presenting a wreath to Aurelian who is standing left, holding spear. Star in lower centre.

Inscription: RESTITVT(or) OR-BIS, "restorer of the world". Mark: KAA.

Diameter (mm): 22.00mm

Weight (g): 4.44g

Commentary:

RIC V/1, Aurelian, no. 289, p. 297.

Many Anglo-Saxon scholars used to call this denomination a 'radiate' as it is characterised by the fact that on its obverse there is a radiate imperial portrait. However, 'radiate' is a general denomination that can refer both to the *antoninianus* and to the *aurelianus*. The *antoninianus* was a new silver coin that had been introduced by Caracalla in 215 CE. It had the same silver content as the *denarius*, but it was heavier (it weighed around 5 g). Many specialists think that its value was that of two *denarii*, but this remains debated. Although its production was stopped by Elagabalus in 219 CE, Pupienus and Balbinus ordered that it should be produced again in 238 CE. Since Caracalla, the weight and silver content of the *antoninianus* were reduced, but the process then accelerated after 250 CE. The debasement reached its lowest point between 260 and 274 CE. During that period, its silver content was reduced to pretty much nothing. In 274 CE, Aurelian undertook a monetary reform in order to reverse the debasement process of the various denominations, and especially of the radiate, which then became the *aurelianus*. His aim was to go back to the system initially established by Caracalla. He ordered an increase in the percentage of silver contained in the radiate (fixed at around 5 %), to improve its weight (fixed at around 4 g, against 2.6 g for the *denarius*), but also to improve the quality of its manufacture. The *aurelianus* was introduced to all the imperial mints during the spring of 274 CE (see Corbier, "Coinage and taxation," p. 332-335; Estiot, "The Later Third Century," p. 540-546). The weight of the coin presented here and the mark KAA appearing in the exergue of the reverse prove that it was minted after this monetary reform of Aurelian. Actually, the mark XXI or KA in Greek (K for 20 and A for 1) were here to prove that the coin was one of the reformed radiates. The second letter A refers to the fact that it had been produced in the first *officina* (workshop) of Serdica.

Considering the context in which this coin was produced, one should remember that from the beginning of his reign



onwards, Aurelian had been confronted with various threats that took place in opposite regions of the Empire. First, in 271 CE Aurelian had to fight against various barbarian raids that affected Pannonia (Vandals) and Northern Italy (Alamanni, Iuthungi). Then, he focused his efforts on the Danubian frontier. Due to the incessant barbarian raids (Dacians, Carpi and Goths) that affected the province of Dacia at its limits established by Trajan, between 271 and 273 CE Aurelian must have ordered the withdrawal of the Roman presence to the south of the Danube. After this, a new province of Dacia located between the former provinces of Upper and Lower Mesia was created. The second crisis Aurelian was confronted with was an external one. While under the reigns of Valerian and Gallienus, the Syrian city of Palmyra had been a helpful ally of Rome, the murder of Odaenathus in 267 CE and the advent of Zenobia, who acted like the regent for her young son, disrupted the relationship between Rome and Palmyra. Zenobia led an aggressive policy of extension of Palmyra's territory. In 271 CE, it extended from Egypt to Asia Minor. At the same time, Zenobia's son, Vaballathus, was invested with numerous Roman titles such as that of *imperator* and *consul*, without Roman consent. Confronting what appeared to be an illegitimate power, Aurelian led a military operation against the Palmyrenes. It ended in 272 CE with the capitulation of Zenobia and her son and the victory of Aurelian. The third main threat Aurelian was confronted with was an internal one. Under the emperor Gallienus, what became one of the most challenging usurpations in the West during the third century began. In 260 CE, a military commander, Postumus, was proclaimed emperor by his troops at the Rhine frontiers. Then, the revolting soldiers took Cologne and killed Gallienus's son and all his support present in the city. Some kind of counter-empire was then created by Postumus, the secessionist area reaching up to Britain, Germania, Hispania, and the Gallic provinces. After the death of Postumus, this usurpation continued up to 274 CE, having later at its head Marius (269), Victorinus (269-271) and Tetricus (271-274). After several unsuccessful attempts of Gallienus and Claudius II to definitively put down the "Gallic emperors," Aurelian and his troops succeeded to defeat Tetricus during the spring of 274 CE, and thus put an end to this Gallic revolt that lasted fourteen years. Thus, Aurelian's celebration of being the *restitutor orbis* can be understood in relation to these, or one of these, various successes embodying the restoration of a unified Roman Empire. We will see in particular that the chronology of the first attribution of the epithet *restitutor orbis* has been debated. The *communis opinio* was that it would have been granted to Aurelian immediately after his victory in Gaul in 274 CE, on the occasion of his triumphal entry to Rome (note that all the inscriptions that can be dated and in which Aurelianus is presented as *restitutor orbis* are from 274-275 CE). This idea has been challenged by Sylviane Estiot, who has argued that the legend *restitutor orbis* may have appeared for the first time after the victorious campaign of Aurelian during the autumn of 272 CE against Palmyra (Estiot, "Le trésor de Maravielle," p. 15, n. 41; Estiot, "Aurélien," p. 101-104). We will consider the credibility of this revision proposed by Sylviane Estiot and see how we can interpret the message conveyed by the coin minted at Serdica presented here.

The use of the epithet *restitutor* dates back to the Flavian and Antonine periods. This epithet was associated with various motifs. An emperor could be praised for being the *restitutor* of a specific province of the empire, meaning that he was thanked for having brought prosperity and/or bringing back order to a specific area. For instance, Hadrian is famous for having been the *restitutor* of numerous provinces (see [Hadrian, Roman soldiers, and Asia](#) [2]). Aurelian himself was praised as being *restitutor Orientis* (RIC V/1, no. 140-141, p. 280; no. 233-234, p. 290; no. 350-351, p. 304) and, perhaps on one inscription, as being *restitutor Galliarum* in order to celebrate his victory over Tetricus (CIL XII, 2673; CIL XII, 5571a; see the re-reading of this inscription proposed in Allard, "Aurélien," p. 165-166). Among the variants of the same kind, the *restitutor* can be associated with the *Urbs*, that is, Rome. It is well attested with Septimius Severus. After the civil wars of the 190s, the use of this title was motivated by the restoration of order, and above all by the will to commemorate the impressive rebuilding program that he undertook in Rome (see RIC IV/1, Septimius Severus, no 140 and 140a, p. 108; no 167-168, p. 113; no 288-290, p. 127; on the issue of coins bearing the legend *restitutor urbis* under Caracalla's joint reign with Severus, see Manders, *Coining Images*, p. 248-249). An emperor could also be praised for being the *restitutor* of a virtue, such as *pietas* (piety), *libertas* (freedom), or *securitas publica* (public security). A further rare association is the emperor presented as being the *restitutor exerciti*, "the restorer of the army," which is attested under Aurelian (RIC V/1, no. 366, p. 306). Finally, the epithet *restitutor* could be used to refer to a more global spatial or temporal entity, as for instance with the *restitutor saeculi* ("restorer of the time"), the *restitutor orbis (terrarum)* ("restorer of the world") – the epithet appearing on this issue but also on coins produced under Hadrian's reign, see [Sestertius depicting the head of Hadrian and the emperor standing above a kneeling personification of the orbis terrarum \(the entire world\) \(119-121 CE\)](#) –, the *restitutor generis humani* ("restorer of humankind"; see [Antoninianus depicting Valerian, restitutor generis humani](#) [3], [walking and holding the globe \(254-255 CE\)](#) [3]), and the *restitutor patriae* ("restorer of the fatherland"), an epithet used by Aurelian himself (CIL III, 7586; about these inscriptions of Aurelian mentioning the epithet *restitutor*, see Sotgiu, *Studi*, p. 27-29). Globally, the epithet *restitutor* is used to praise the emperor for being able to bring back prosperity and peace in a more or less specific area, to restore some virtues that would have been challenged, and to bring back order and joy into the Roman Empire and among the Romans. In this official context, the term *restitutor* systematically implies that the emperor can stop the ageing



or degradation processes by working for their reversion and for the re-establishment of an ideal state and/or age. By assigning this epithet to the emperors the extraordinary qualities and the divine essence of the honoured emperors were highlighted (see Hostein, *La cité et l'empereur*, p. 293).

Being associated with the imperial figure, the epithet *restitutor orbis* (*terrarum*) appears for the first time on coins minted under the reign of Hadrian (see **Sestertius depicting the head of Hadrian and the emperor standing above a kneeling personification of the orbis terrarum (the entire world) (119-121 CE)**), and then reappears on coins minted under the emperor Valerian (RIC V/1, Valerian, no. 116-119, p. 47, produced between 256 and 258 CE). Moreover, the first emperor to be celebrated in epigraphical documents as *restitutor orbis* was Severus Alexander, who reigned between 222 and 235 CE (see the inscription CIL VIII, 8797a = AE 1940, no. 151; Alföldy, "The Crisis of the Third Century," p. 92; for a representation of Severus Alexander as ruler of the world, see **Denarius depicting the head of Severus Alexander and the emperor symbolically depicted as the ruler of the orbis terrarum (the entire world) (224-225 CE)**). From then on, many emperors of the third century CE continued to present themselves as *restitutor orbis* (this is the case for Gordian III, Philip the Arab, Valerian, Claudius II, Aurelian, Marcus Claudius Tacitus, Florianus, Probus, Carus, and Postumus, and it continued under the Tetrarchs, see [Latin Panegyric II \(10\).1](#) [4]). It is certainly under the reign of the emperor Aurelian (270-275 CE) that the frequency of use of this epithet associated with the emperor reached a peak (on the use of the epithet, see the list in Peachin, *Roman Imperial*, p. 514, entry "*restitutor orbis*"). The epithet is associated with Aurelian both on coins and on inscriptions. Concerning coins, the broad distribution of the *restitutor orbis* type is best illustrated by the numerous mints in which these coins were produced, namely [Serdica](#) [5] (Thracia) – which is the case with the coin presented here –, Milan, Rome, [Cyzicus](#) [6] (Asia), [Tripolis](#) [7] (Phoenicia) and [Antioch](#) [8] (Syria). As stated by Valérie Allard, the repartition of the mints that had produced this type reflects the phenomenon of multiplication and of delocalisation of the mints towards the peripheries of the Empire that occurred during the third century CE (Allard, "Aurélien," p. 169). Concerning inscriptions mentioning explicitly the epithet *restitutor orbis* and associating it with Aurelian, one should note that the few that can be dated all date from 274 or 275 CE. Their distribution area is much narrower, as they are attested in Numidia, Italy and in Narbonensis. They are thus located in the very core of the Empire, far from the margins that were distanced from Rome because of the Gallic Empire and of the Palmyrene expansionist policy. As stated by Valérie Allard, the epigraphic praise of Aurelian as *restitutor orbis* is mainly concentrated in regions that were concerned with road rehabilitation programs (Africa and Narbonensis), that benefitted from imperial largesse (Serdica – see above), or that were part of the very centre of the Empire (Italy) (see Allard, "Aurélien," p. 169).

The last important point that must be studied is the scene depicted on the reverse of the coin presented here, and its relationship to the theme of the *restitutio orbis* and its historical context. On the reverse of the radiate is a woman wearing a long and transparent tunic, who offers a wreath to the emperor, represented cuirassed, wearing on his head the radiate crown, and holding a spear in his left hand. First, it should be noted that this theme was associated with the legend *restitutor orbis* for the first time under Aurelian's reign. Sylviane Estiot has suggested that the epithet of *restitutor orbis* would have appeared for the first time on the reverse of numismatic coins produced after the end of Aurelian's victorious campaign against Palmyra during the fall of 272 CE – and not only after the crush of the Gallic emperors in 274 CE. Among the arguments developed by Sylviane Estiot, there is first the existence of *antoniniani* bearing the legend *restitutor orbis* produced at Antioch after Aurelian's re-conquering of the city and before his monetary reform (see Estiot, "Aurélien," p. 101; in the exergue of the reverse of these coins it is mentioned that they had been produced in the 3rd (?) and 6th (?) *officiae* of Antioch, RIC V/1, no. 386, p. 308). Second, it seems that this type with the legend *restitutor orbis* must have progressively replaced the type with the legend *restitutor Orientis* (on this point see Estiot, "Aurélien," p. 101). This appears even more obvious if we consider that a type with the legend *restitutor Orientis* presented a similar scene on the reverse to the one depicted on the type with the legend *restitutor orbis* analysed here (see for instance RIC V/1, no. 140 (mint of Milan), p. 280; no. 234, p. 290 (mint of Siscia)). As stated by Valérie Allard, these coins honouring the emperor as *restitutor Orientis* and representing a woman offering a wreath – probably a golden one – to the emperor must have been produced to celebrate the end of the illegitimate taking of power and of the illegal conquests of Zenobia and Vaballath. Thus, Sylviane Estiot's thesis that the epithet of *restitutor orbis* appeared for the first time on the reverse of numismatic coins produced after the end of Aurelian's victorious campaign against Palmyra is convincing. The second point which is important to consider in order to fully understand the relationship between the scene represented on the reverse of this type, the legend, and the historical context in which it had been produced is the identity of the feminine figure. Some scholars have identified her with Victoria, however Valérie Allard has rightly recalled that she does not have wings, which was one common attribute of Victoria. For this scholar, the woman represented on this type should not be interpreted as a Victoria, nor as a Tychè, nor as a specific personified province, but may rather embody provincial populations welcoming a Roman victory or manifesting their attachment to the Roman power. Actually, the gesture performed by this feminine figure recalls the granting of golden crowns



to victorious military commanders under the Republican period, and later to provincial governors or emperors (see Allard, "Aurélien," p. 152-153). To sum up, the woman represented on the reverse of the type presented here would embody all the cities in the Roman East that had rallied behind or had been submitted to the Palmyrene power, and that during Aurelian's re-conquering of the East welcomed the emperor by showing him that they were happy with his victory. Thus, it would not only be the imperial victory that is celebrated in this scene – even if this dimension is present and symbolised through the warlike attire of the emperor –, but above all the fact that the imperial victory was a source of joy for provincials, who manifested their loyalty towards the imperial power (see Allard, "Aurélien," p. 153-154). The fact that this scene was later associated with the image of the emperor *restitutor orbis* may show that from the end of the campaign against Zenobia, Aurelian wanted to present his victory against Palmyra as putting an end to his operations of recovery of the territories of the Roman world that had been conquered by a foreign power.

Born in this context of re-conquest of the territories taken by the Palmyrene power, the epithet of *restitutor orbis* continued to be used afterwards in Aurelian's propaganda in association with the coin type bearing the woman offering a wreath to the emperor. As stated by Valérie Allard, it continued to be used not only to commemorate the past victory over the Palmyrene power, but also Aurelian's new victories. The coin presented here is a good example of the continuity of the minting of this type with the legend *restitutor orbis*, as the KAA in the exergue of the reverse shows that it had been produced after the monetary reform that occurred during the spring of 274 CE. The mint of Serdica opened under Aurelian's reign, and it is one of the mints that continued to produce this type after the victory over Tetricus and the celebration of Aurelian's triumph in Rome, up to the end of Aurelian's reign in September 275 CE. One should note that Serdica had been chosen by Aurelian – who was himself of Illyrian origin – as capital of the new province of Dacia that had been created on the left bank of the Danube after the abandonment of transdanubian Dacia. Serdica was thus a city that had benefitted from Aurelian's policy and largesse. This particular situation and history may explain why its mint continued to produce the highest number of coins commemorating the prince *restitutor orbis* in association with this feminine figure offering the wreath to Aurelian (see Allard, "Aurélien," p. 161). Moreover, there may exist an interesting correspondence between this type of coin praising the *restitutor* emperor produced at Serdica and some inscriptions coming from this new province of Dacia. One of these is from Serdica itself and is dedicated to the emperor Aurelian. Following the re-reading of that inscription proposed by Valérie Allard (based on the fragment of milestone from Slivnica), this inscription of Serdica may have been dedicated to the emperor Aurelian by the *recuperata res publica* (see CIL III, 12333 and 13714; Allard, "Aurélien," p. 160-161). If this reading is correct, then these two inscriptions would be supplementary examples showing how the policy of praise of the *restitutio imperii* led by Aurelian had been particularly developed in this new province of Dacia, which could be through numismatic production or inscriptions. The city of Serdica and the whole province of Dacia had thus been attached to praise Aurelian for his global military achievements that had enabled to restore the unity of the empire, and, thus, of the world. The praise of the prince *restitutor* was not simply connected to the necessity to highlight the martial qualities of the emperor and his capacity to restore prosperity and order. The image of the prince *restitutor* was also used in the dialogue existing between the imperial centre and the provincial populations in the peripheries of the Empire to highlight the gratitude of the provincials towards the military achievements of the emperor. This dual dimension is perfectly illustrated in the numismatic type presented here.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Aurelianus](#) [9]
- [restitutor](#) [10]
- [orbis](#) [11]

Thematic keywords:

- [Aurelian](#) [12]
- [wreath](#) [13]
- [military dress](#) [14]
- [Serdica](#) [15]
- [restorer](#) [16]
- [restorer of the world](#) [17]



- [Roman empire](#) [18]
- [unity of the empire](#) [19]
- [provincials](#) [20]
- [provincial loyalty](#) [21]

Bibliographical references: Allard, Valérie, "[Aurélien, restitutor orbis et triomphateur](#)" [22], in La "crise" de l'Empire romain de Marc Aurèle à Constantin. Mutations, continuités, ruptures (ed. Marie-Henriette Quet; Paris: Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 2006), 149-172

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Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Latin Panegyric II \(10\).1](#) [4]

Celebration of Rome's birthday under Maximian and Diocletian

- [Read more about Latin Panegyric II \(10\).1](#) [4]

Numismatic item

[Antoninianus depicting Valerian, restitutor generis humani, walking and holding the globe \(254-255 CE\)](#) [3]

- [Read more about Antoninianus depicting Valerian, restitutor generis humani, walking and holding the globe \(254-255 CE\)](#) [3]

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