



Aureus depicting the head of Hadrian and Aequitas, the goddess of justice (119-122 CE)

Aureus depicting the head of Hadrian and Aequitas, the personification of justice (123 CE)



[1]

Denomination:

Aureus

Date: 119 CE to 122 CE

Material:

Gold

Mint:

Rome

Name of Ruler:

Hadrian

Obverse (Image and Inscription):

Image: Laureate, draped and cuirassed bust of Hadrian looking right

Inscription: IMP CAESAR TRAIAN HADRIANUS AUG

Reverse (Image and Inscription):

Image: Aequitas, draped, standing on left holding balancing scales in her right hand and a cornucopia in her left hand

Inscription: PM TRP COS III

Commentary:

(RIC II, Hadrian no. 80c, p. 350)

This aureus, dated to between 119 and 122 CE, depicts on the obverse the head of Hadrian, and on the reverse Aequitas, the personification of justice, holding a balancing scale and a cornucopia. The inscription, which runs from the obverse to the reverse, refers to Hadrian as imperator, Caesar, Trajan – the name of his predecessor assumed by Hadrian, to signify dynastic association – Hadrian, Augustus, pontifex maximus, or high priest of the Roman state religion, holder of the tribunician power, and consul for the third time. This allows us to date the coin to after 119 CE. Personifications of Aequitas, along with those of Clementia, Concordia, Felicitas, Iustitia, Pax, Providentia, Pudicitia, and Salus, found on Hadrian's coinage between 119 and 122 CE, all "express the ideals of the new reign" which Hadrian had laid out in 117-118 CE, and forwarded the tenets of his imperial policy to the empire (Mattingly, *Roman Imperial Coinage* II, p. 21). Numerous coin types were minted under various emperors with this very same image of Aequitas (see Noreña, *Imperial Ideals*, p. 335), and as Erika Manders notes (drawing on the evidence presented by Noreña), the frequency of the theme of *aequitas* (along with *providentia*, *liberalitas*, *virtus*, and *pietas*) on coins during the period 69-235 CE suggests that these years saw a particular importance placed upon the emperor possessing it as a virtue (*Coining Images of Power*, p. 162).

The personification of Aequitas referred to either the legal concept of equity or fairness between individuals. In



Roman jurisprudence, *aequitas* was considered as one of the three main elements which contributed to the concept of *ius* (law), together with *leges* (statutes) and *mores* (customs). For the Roman philosopher Cicero, who drew upon the scheme already outlined in Plato's *Republic* IV.426-435, the concept of *aequitas*, which mirrored the Greek concept of ?????????? (*dikaion*?, justice or righteousness), was one of the four philosophical cardinal virtues, together with *temperantia* (moderation, temperance), *fortitudo* (bravery), and *prudentia* (wisdom) (Cicero, *On Invention* II.159). Cicero defined *aequitas* as tripartite in form: the first part pertained to the gods above, and was equivalent to *pietas*, religious obligation; the second part referred to the Manes, the underworld spirits or spirits of the dead, and was equivalent to *sanctitas*, that which is sacred; and the third part pertained to human beings, and was equivalent to *iustitia*, justice (Cicero, *Topica* 90). However, as we shall see, the representation of Aequitas on coins such as the present example may not be directly related to the judicial system, but rather to the notion of fairness in the monetary realm instead.

As Carlos Noreña explains, Aequitas represented fairness, which was the most important characteristic of ideal imperial justice. It was the “broad, central meaning of *aequitas* as justice or fairness and, in particular, the term's semantic overlap between an abstract principle of jurisprudence and a personal quality of individuals...that makes *aequitas* so resonant as an imperial virtue” (*Imperial Ideals*, p. 64). The inhabitants of the Roman empire would have placed much value on *aequitas* due its close association with the process of judicial inquiry, or *cognitio*. The *cognitio* was the final verdict given by the emperor as supreme judge, or a provincial governor, once he had supervised and concluded all the relevant investigations required by a particular case. However, there were no external laws binding the judges in this situation, and arbitrary judgement was a danger (Noreña, *Imperial Ideals*, p. 65; for an example of such proceedings, see the inscription recording Caracalla's court minutes in Dmeir (Syria)). During the rule of Hadrian, *aequitas* became a seminal concept of imperial rule. Hadrian reorganized the Roman legal system so that the praetorian edict ceased to be the main source of law. Instead, this was replaced by a permanent code which the magistrates had to administer as it was, without alterations. From then onwards, the emperor became the primary source of law through his decisions, handed out as *rescripta*, or answers. Hadrian travelled widely between the provinces, and everywhere he went he held assizes as supreme judge. In this sense, he epitomized the concept of justice in the eyes of the provincials. It might be tempting, therefore, to interpret this coin as reinforcing the message that the emperor was the symbol of Roman imperial justice, which was handed out from the top down, from the *princeps* to his people all across the empire.

However, for Noreña, this interpretation broadens the message of this coin type excessively (*Imperial Ideals*, p. 66-67). He draws attention to the image of Aequitas on the reverse holding her iconic scales (which were symbolic of the economic sphere where things were weighed, and coins were valued) and cornucopia (which symbolised plenty and abundance), and argues that the context in which the type was introduced, under the emperor Galba, militates against reading the message of such coins as one of judicial fairness. Noreña explains that this coin type responded to rebel mints which had promoted coins featuring Moneta, the personification of the monetary system, who was closely associated with Aequitas. Their symbolism and legends became almost identical. Indeed, Hadrian also minted coins featuring Moneta around the same time as the present issue. For this reason, it is argued by Noreña that coin types such as that in the present example forward a message of financial fairness, suggesting that the emperor oversaw an economy that was both fruitful and honest. The notion of *aequitas* as an imperial virtue is therefore important in relation to the fact that the emperor was at the head of the empire's financial institutions and as such represented their “intrinsic value” even if he had little involvement in day-to-day business of mints etc. (*Imperial Ideals*, p. 67). This said, however, the fact that Hadrian also minted coins featuring Moneta, who was more obviously tied to the monetary system of the empire, might suggest that we can still understand the message of the present coin as one which forwards a broader message about justice and fairness embodied by the emperor. While the economy of the empire was an important feature of this, there is no reason to suppose that imperial justice and fairness more generally, including in the legal sphere, was not a factor in this coin's propaganda.

Keywords in the original language:

- [imperator](#) [2]
- [Caesar](#) [3]
- [Augustus](#) [4]
- [pontifex maximus](#) [5]
- [tribunicia potestas](#) [6]



- [consul](#) [7]

Thematic keywords:

- [Hadrian](#) [8]
- [justice](#) [9]
- [Roman justice](#) [10]
- [jurisprudence](#) [11]
- [Roman law](#) [12]
- [Roman court](#) [13]
- [Aequitas](#) [14]
- [economy](#) [15]
- [virtue](#) [16]
- [cornucopia](#) [17]
- [scales](#) [18]

Bibliographical references:

[Coining Images of Power: Patterns in the Representation of Roman Emperors on Imperial Coinage, A.D. 193-284](#) [19]

Manders, Erikabook*Coining Images of Power: Patterns in the Representation of Roman Emperors on Imperial Coinage, A.D. 193-284*Leiden - New YorkBrill2012

[Imperial Ideals in the Roman West: Representation, Circulation, Power](#) [20]

Noreña, Carlos F.book*Imperial Ideals in the Roman West: Representation, Circulation, Power*CambridgeCambridge University Press2011

Other sources connected with this document: Inscription

[Caracalla's court minutes in Dmeir \(Syria\)](#) [21]

Bilingual minutes of a hearing in a tribunal presided by Caracalla in Antioch, with a case involving the piety of the emperor.

- [Read more about Caracalla's court minutes in Dmeir \(Syria\)](#) [21]

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