



## Aureus depicting the head of Septimius Severus and the legionary eagle between two standards of the Legio XIV Gemina (193 CE)

aureus\_septimius\_severus-193-leg\_xiiii\_gmv.jpg



[1]

**Denomination:**

Aureus

**Date:** 193 CE

**Material:**

Gold

**Mint:**

Rome

**Name of Ruler:**

Septimius Severus

**Obverse (Image and Inscription):**

Image: Laureate head of Septimius Severus looking right

Inscription: IMP CAE L SEV PERT AVG

**Reverse (Image and Inscription):**

Image: Legionary eagle between two standards

Inscription: LEG XIII GEM MV // TR P COS

**Commentary:**

For the image of this coin: [http://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.4.ss.14\\_aureus?lang=ro](http://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.4.ss.14_aureus?lang=ro) [2]

RIC IV/1, Septimius Severus, no. 14, p. 93.

This *aureus*, minted in Rome in 193 CE, depicts on the obverse the head of Septimius Severus, and on the reverse a legionary eagle between two standards. It offers an example of how important the presentation of the close bond between the Roman emperor and the Roman army was for cementing an image of Roman power that was defined by military strength.

Lucius Septimius Severus, the son of an equestrian, born in 146 CE, came from Leptis Magna. He was helped in his career by two cousins, Publius Septimius Aper and Gaius Septimius Severus, who served as consuls under the emperor Antoninus Pius. Thus, Marcus Aurelius, the successor of Antoninus Pius, granted him access to the senatorial order. He began as a member of the vigintivirate (a college of Roman minor magistrates). In 169 CE Septimius became a quaestor, and proceeded to rise through the ranks of the *cursus honorum*, until in 190 CE, towards the end of Commodus's reign, he became consul. In 191 CE, Commodus appointed Septimius Severus to the command of the legions in Pannonia (for a survey of the major points in Septimius Severus's career, see Birley, *Septimius Severus*, p. 47-56, 77-80, 83, 97-107). After the murder of Pertinax (see Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 74.8-10), and once news of the proclamation of the usurper Didius Julianus as emperor reached the Danubian frontier in 193 CE, the legions of Pannonia (which included the Legio XIV Gemina) proclaimed Septimius



Severus, the leader of the fourteenth, emperor at Carnutum, and supported him on his march to Rome to take the throne.

The inscription on the obverse of this issue refers to Septimius Severus as *imperator*, Caesar, Lucius Severus, Pertinax, Augustus. The inscription on the reverse refers to the Legio XIV (inscribed as XIII) Gemina M(artia) V(ictrix), one of the first military units which supported Septimius Severus's bid for the empire. The Legio XIV Gemina (the "twin legion") was one of the oldest units of the Roman army. Established by Julius Caesar in 57 BCE, it received its name, Gemina Martia, because it was created through the amalgamation of the Martia and Victrix legions during the rule of Augustus. This coin bears Septimius Severus's most important titles of power. He is described as *imperator*, acknowledging the military power conferred on him by the army. In addition, he makes use of both the titles of Caesar and Augustus. From the Flavian period onwards, while Caesar designated the heir to the throne, Augustus designated the reigning sovereign. However, at that time, as the emperor had not appointed an heir, Septimius Severus used both titles. Last but not least, Septimius Severus had also assumed the name Pertinax to highlight his association with the murdered emperor and enhance his legitimacy, also with the aim of ensuring the loyalty of soldiers that had previously served under Pertinax (see Cooley, "Septimius Severus: the Augustan Emperor," p. 390; see also p. 386, where Cooley also highlights an inscription of 195 CE where the emperor is also referred to as Lucius Septimius Severus Pertinax; see p. 385-387 for a broader discussion of his genealogical claims, particularly to the Antonine dynasty; see also Birley, *Septimius Severus*, p. 97).

As Erika Manders notes, the "most exceptional" third-century examples (although this coin is a second-century example) of coins such as this issue, which refer to specific military units, were minted by Septimius Severus and Gallienus (reigned 253-268 CE, 260-268 CE as sole emperor) (*Coining Images of Power*, p. 93). The images on all such coin types of Septimius are identical, depicting a legionary eagle between two standards (for the eagle, see also the table in Carlos Noreña, *Imperial Ideals*, p. 344). These issues were designed specifically to declare a particular legion's loyalty to the emperor, which was particularly vital during the period 193-194 CE when they were minted due to Septimius's fight for sole rule, when he needed the support of the troops (Manders, *Coining Images of Power*, p. 94; Campbell, *The Emperor and the Roman Army*, p. 372). This was not the first time that a Roman emperor or leader had celebrated the personal and close bond between himself and the army in such a way. Previously, Mark Antony and later Hadrian had minted similar coins which celebrated this bond through the depiction of army standards (for Antony: RRC, no. 544/1-39; for Hadrian: RIC II, Hadrian no. 539, p. 406; 546b, p. 407; 746, p. 436; 919a, p. 459; 929, p. 461; 931, p. 462; 977, p. 469). For Septimius, the support of one of the most important and most decorated units of the Roman army, the Legio XIV Gemina, was of capital importance.

Septimius Severus's reign has often been referred to as a 'military monarchy' due to the emperor's close connections with the army, their significance in his rise to and maintenance of power, and their apparent prominence in his imperial policies. Septimius's army was considerably larger than those of his predecessors, with a significant amount of recruiting and substantial expenditure, the intention being to ensure the defence of the empire and its leader by loyal troops. However, Brian Campbell has offered some balance to this overall picture by stating that the increase in military pay implemented by Septimius was overdue anyway, and the legal privileges given to soldiers were not drastically different from those granted under previous emperors. Moreover, while Septimius "emphasised the military role of the emperor" it was really his reliance on the troops for support in civil war that marked him out from other emperors; evidence does not really support the claim that he gave preferential treatment to soldiers or 'militarised' his administration ("The Severan Dynasty," p. 9-10, quotation at p. 10). Nonetheless, he was popular among the troops, and this is evidenced by inscriptions (see the examples listed in Campbell, "The Severan Dynasty," p. 9, n. 17: ILS 2438; 2445; 3446).

*Aurei*, such as the one which is presented here, were generally used by the senatorial, equestrian and provincial elites. However, gold was also used to pay soldiers' bonuses. Whereas in the case of the *denarius*, the silver content was reduced by fifty percent, Septimius Severus did not reduce the value of the *aureus* like Didius Julianus had done (see Grant, *The Severans*, p. 35, 42). The message forwarded on this *aureus* is very clear; the personal power of Septimius Severus was closely related to the personal bond between the emperor and the army. He had relied upon the military in order to establish his power in the first place, and needed to continue to appease his troops. By emphasising the connection between the emperor and the Roman army, coins such as the present example made clear that the military was a central and important component of imperial power.

Keywords in the original language:



- [Caesar](#) [3]
- [Augustus](#) [4]
- [imperator](#) [5]
- [Legio XIII Gemina](#) [6]

Thematic keywords:

- [Septimius Severus](#) [7]
- [civil war](#) [8]
- [Roman army](#) [9]
- [Roman legion](#) [10]
- [Legio XIV Gemina](#) [11]
- [eagle](#) [12]
- [standards](#) [13]
- [loyalty](#) [14]
- [military monarchy](#) [15]
- [Roman power](#) [16]
- [Roman emperor](#) [17]

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- [6] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/legio-xiii-gemina>
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- [12] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/eagle>
- [13] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/standards>
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