



Aureus depicting the head of Trajan and two Parthians mourning below trophy (116 CE)

Aureus depicting the head of Trajan and the personification of Parthia mourning below trophy (116 CE)



[1]

Denomination:

Aureus

Date: 116 CE

Date: 2nd CE to 2nd CE

Material:

Gold

Mint:

Rome

Name of Ruler:

Trajan

Obverse (Image and Inscription):

Inscription: IMP CAES NER TRAIAN OPTIM AVG GER DAC PARTHICO

Image: Laureate bust of Trajan looking right, aegis on left shoulder, globe at base of bust

Reverse (Image and Inscription):

Inscription: P M TR P COS VI P P SPQR, PARTHIA CA

Image: Parthians seated in attitude of mourning below trophy, one to the left and one to the right

Commentary:

(RIC II, Trajan no. 325, p. 267)

This aureus, minted in 116 CE, depicts on the obverse the laureate head of Trajan wearing the aegis, with a globe at bottom of his bust, and on the reverse two Parthians, a woman and a man, seated mourning below a trophy. The inscription on the obverse, "IMP CAES NER TRAIAN OPTIM AVG GER DAC PARTHICO," celebrates Trajan as imperator, Caesar, optimus, Augustus, Germanicus, Dacicus and Parthicus, while the inscription on the reverse, "P M TR P COS VI P P SPQR, PARTHIA CA," acknowledges him as pontifex maximus, or high priest of the Roman religion, holder of the tribunician power, consul for the sixth time, and *pater patriae*, or father of the country. The reverse inscription also refers to the thanks of the Senate and of the People of Rome (SPQR) for the conquest of Parthia. Contrary to previous emperors, Trajan is celebrated as *optimus*, "the best"; the title *optimus princeps* was bestowed upon him by the Senate in 114 CE (see Bennett, *Trajan*, p. 104-117). Trajan is depicted here wearing the aegis, in much the same way as several other emperors were on their coinage. Although its precise nature has been debated, the aegis is thought to be some form of body armour or animal skin associated with the Greek goddess Athena, and later with Minerva (see Homer's *Iliad* IV.17). The aegis symbolised strength and protection, and in this case, the aegis worn by Trajan can be seen to emphasise the divine protection which was partly responsible for the victory that the emperor had won over the Parthians. Moreover, under the bust of Trajan a small globe indicates Trajan's ambition to dominate the whole *oikoumenè*. As Carlos Noreña acknowledges, between 69



and 235 numerous coins were minted celebrating victories over specific places, whether these were real or imagined (*Imperial Ideals*, p. 162), and this issue provides one such example.

This coin commemorates the Parthian War, the first campaign of which Trajan started in 114 CE in response to the enthronement of the Parthian Parthamasiris, on the throne of Armenia in the previous year. By the end of 114 CE, Armenia had been annexed as a Roman province and the Parthian king deposed. In 115 CE the Roman army conquered northern Mesopotamia, and continued to organise and expand this new province over the course of 116 CE, conquering Adiabene, Babylon, Seleucia, and finally the Parthian capital, Ctesiphon (we have few ancient accounts detailing Trajan's Parthian campaign, only Xiphilinus's excerpts of Cassius Dio's *History* and Arrian's *Parthica*, and it is not commemorated in monuments like the Dacian campaigns. Scholars continue to debate Trajan's precise motives for the war, with some suggesting economic incentive and others focusing more on the prestige of conquering lands for Rome or military strategy. See, for example, Bennett, *Trajan*, p. 183-204; Lightfoot, "Trajan's Parthian War," which examines fourth century discussions of Trajan's campaign; Sicker, *The Pre-Islamic Middle East*, p. 166-187).

The Parthian captives are pictured in total submission on the reverse of this issue, in typical poses suggestive of capture and defeat – sitting with their faces in their hands. The depiction of the trophy (*trophaeum*), originally a tree hung with armour and spoils of the enemy, which stands between the two captives, is very typical on Roman coins which celebrate military victory. Trophies on imperial coinage either stand with captives beneath them, as on this issue, or are carried by a deity or other person (e.g. [Aureus depicting the head of Septimius Severus and Victoria, the goddess of victory \(198-200 CE\)](#) [2]). The iconography depicted on the reverse of this issue mirrors that of the previously minted series *Iudaea Capta* ("Judea Captured") coins by Vespasian and Titus, which celebrated their victory over the Jewish people in the First Jewish Revolt of 70 CE, which resulted in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. For example, a [Sestertius depicting Vespasian and a couple of Jews mourning under a palm tree \(71 CE\)](#) [3] depicts two defeated Jews in a submissive pose under a symbol of Judea, the palm tree. Similarly, the *Germania Capta* series minted by Domitian also imitated the *Iudaea Capta* type (e.g. [Sestertius depicting the head of Domitian and a trophy with German captives \(85 CE\)](#) [4]).

When the imagery on the obverse and the reverse of this coin are considered together, the Parthian captives sitting subdued beneath the trophy (a poignant symbol of Rome's military triumph over them) can be understood as one people that the Roman power has conquered under Trajan as part of his aspirations for global rule, which is symbolised by the globe at his bust.

Keywords in the original language:

- [imperator](#) [5]
- [Caesar](#) [6]
- [optimus](#) [7]
- [Augustus](#) [8]
- [Germanicus](#) [9]
- [Dacicus](#) [10]
- [Parthicus](#) [11]
- [pontifex maximus](#) [12]
- [tribunicia potestas](#) [13]
- [consul](#) [14]
- [pater patriae](#) [15]
- [Parthia capta](#) [16]
- [Senatus Populusque Romanus](#) [17]

Thematic keywords:

- [Trajan](#) [18]
- [Parthians](#) [19]



- [king](#) [20]
- [war](#) [21]
- [triumph](#) [22]
- [victory](#) [23]
- [ally](#) [24]
- [client king](#) [25]

Bibliographical references: Bennett, Julian, [Trajan: Optimus Princeps](#) [26] (Roman Imperial Biographies; London: Routledge, 2000)

Lightfoot, Chris S., ["Trajan's Parthian War and the Fourth-Century Perspective"](#) [27], *Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990) : 115-126

Noreña, Carlos F., [Imperial Ideals in the Roman West: Representation, Circulation, Power](#) [28] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)

Sicker, Martin, [The Pre-Islamic Middle East](#) [29] (London: Greenwood, 2000)

Other sources connected with this document: Numismatic item

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Numismatic item

[Sestertius depicting Vespasian and a couple of Jews mourning under a palm tree \(71 CE\) \[31\]](#)

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Numismatic item

[Sestertius depicting the head of Domitian and a trophy with German captives \(85 CE\) \[32\]](#)

- [Read more about Sestertius depicting the head of Domitian and a trophy with German captives \(85 CE\) \[32\]](#)

Realized by:

[Kimberley Fowler \[33\]](#)



[Samuele Rocca \[34\]](#)



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Links

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- [2] <http://judaism-and-rome.cnrs.fr/aureus-depicting-head-septimius-severus-and-victoria-goddess-victory-198-200-ce>
- [3] <http://judaism-and-rome.cnrs.fr/sestertius-depicting-vespasian-and-couple-jews-mourning-under-palm-tree-71-ce>
- [4] <http://judaism-and-rome.cnrs.fr/sestertius-depicting-head-domitian-and-trophy-german-captives-85-ce>
- [5] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/imperator>
- [6] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/caesar>
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- [27] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/%E2%80%99Ctrajan%E2%80%99s-parthian-war-and-fourth-century-perspective%E2%80%9D>
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- [30] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/aureus-depicting-head-septimius-severus-and-victoria-goddess-victory-198-200-ce>
- [31] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/sestertius-depicting-vespasian-and-couple-jews-mourning-under-palm-tree-71-ce>
- [32] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/sestertius-depicting-head-domitian-and-trophy-german-captives-85-ce>
- [33] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/erc-team/kimberley-fowler>
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