



Sestertius depicting the head of Trajan and the same riding on a horse hurling spear at a Dacian (105 CE)

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[1]

Denomination:

Sestertius

Date: 2nd CE to 2nd CE

Material:

Bronze

Mint:

Rome

Name of Ruler:

Trajan

Obverse (Image and Inscription): Image: Laureate head of Trajan looking to right, with slight drapery on his far shoulder

Inscription: IMP CAES NERVAE TRAIANO AVG GER DAC P M TR P COS V PP

Reverse (Image and Inscription): Image: Trajan, in armor, on horse galloping to right, hurling spear at fallen Dacian crawling to right

Inscription: SPQR OPTIMO PRINCIPI SC

Diameter (mm): 33.00mm

Weight (g): 22.96g

Commentary: (RIC II, Trajan, 543, p. 282)

The obverse of this sestertius minted between 103-111 CE, depicts the head of Trajan, while the reverse depicts the emperor, on a horse, piercing a fallen Dacian with a spear. The inscription on the obverse reads *imperator*, Caesar, Augustus, Germanicus, Dacicus, *pontifex maximus*, or high priest of Roman state religion, holder of *tribunicia potestas*, consul for the fifth time and *pater patriae*, or father of the fatherland. The inscription on the reverse refers to the title *optimus princeps*, "the best ruler," which was bestowed upon him by the Senate in 114 CE. The letters SC, which stand for the words *senatus consultum*, which already appear during the reign of Augustus, indicate that the senate had given its assent to the minting of bronze coins whose value was less than the nominal one.

Trajan waged the First Dacian War against Decebalus between 101-102 CE, continuing a campaign that had begun under the reign of Domitian, in retaliation against the Dacians' killing of the governor of Moesia, Oppius Sabinus in 85-86 CE. Domitian mounted personally an expedition against the Dacians, driving the Barbarians back across the Danube. However Cornelius Fuscus, the praetorian prefect was defeated and killed in 86 CE during an ill-fated expedition at the first battle of Tapae. Once more Domitian led an expedition against the Dacians, who were defeated in 88 CE (see Suetonius, *Domitian*, 6; Mócsy, *Pannonia and Upper Moesia*, p. 80-85). Although in the following peace, Domitian agreed to pay to Decebalus an annual subsidy, most scholars today agree that Domitian's policy towards the Dacians paved the way to Trajan's successful wars. Trajan waged the First Dacian



War against Decebalus between 101-102 CE, but the war was only a partial success; although Trajan defeated the Dacians at Tapae, Trajan had to face a counter attack from Decebalus the following year, which however resulted in a failure for the Dacians. King Decebalus retreated, and Trajan, back in Rome, was awarded the title *Dacicus Maximus* (for the First Dacian War, see Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 68.10.3; Bennett, *Trajan*, p. 95-98).

The victory was celebrated on the reverse through the depiction of the emperor, riding on a horse, hurling a spear at a fallen Dacian. The origin of this scene, i.e. a horseman spearing a fallen enemy, must be sought in the late classical-Hellenistic iconography of the king hunting with a spear; the young Alexander is depicted as such on a wall painting from Philip II's tomb at Vergina. This iconography appears also on later imperial coins minted by Antoninus Pius (137-161 CE), Marcus Aurelius (161-180 CE), and Commodus (180-192 CE). Moreover, this iconography appears on Jewish gems, dated to the second and third centuries, as well (see e.g. Israel Antiquities Authority Collection (1931.2); Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman period* II, p. 227). They depict King Solomon, riding on a horse, dressed as a Hellenistic King or as a Roman emperor, and trampling under his horse feet a she-daemon. As far as the coin is concerned, the message conveyed by the scene depicted on the obverse, a scene heavily influenced by Hellenistic royal iconography, emphasises the supreme power of the ruler, who is always victorious. In the case of the Dacian Wars, the coinage minted in their aftermath demonstrated the full force of the Roman propaganda machine in action; not only did *sestertii* such as this appear with active scenes of battle, but numerous other coins were issued which highlighted the total subjugation of the Dacian people. From the personification of Dacia, depicted bound and captive, to individual Dacians in mourning or kneeling before Rome, as well as images of Nike, the goddess of Victory, inscribing *Dacica* on a shield, the coins projected the invincible nature of Roman power and the inevitability of its continued expansion.

Keywords in the original language:

- [imperator](#) [2]
- [Caesar](#) [3]
- [Augustus](#) [4]
- [Germanicus](#) [5]
- [Dacicus](#) [6]
- [optimus princeps](#) [7]
- [Senatus Populusque Romanus](#) [8]
- [senatus consultum](#) [9]

Thematic keywords:

- [Trajan](#) [10]
- [victory](#) [11]
- [hunt](#) [12]
- [bravery](#) [13]
- [Dacia](#) [14]
- [province](#) [15]
- [horse](#) [16]
- [spear](#) [17]
- [Dacians](#) [18]
- [Roman power](#) [19]
- [Roman army](#) [20]
- [Roman invincibility](#) [21]

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Mócsy, András, [Pannonia and Upper Moesia](#) [25] (London: Routledge, 1974)

Other sources connected with this document: Relief / Sculpture



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- [3] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/caesar>
- [4] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/augustus>
- [5] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/germanicus>
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