



Sestertius depicting the head of Valerian and the same raising the personification of the Orbis Terrarum (256-257 CE)

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[1]

Denomination:

Sestertius

Date: 256 CE to 257 CE

Material:

Brass (Æ)

Mint:

Rome

Name of Ruler:

Valerian

Obverse (Image and Inscription):

Image: Laureate and cuirassed bust of Valerian looking right

Inscription: IMP C P LIC VALERIANVS P F AVG

Reverse (Image and Inscription):

Image: Valerian standing left, holding spear, raising kneeling female

Inscription: RESTITVTOR ORBIS - SC

Weight (g): 17.96g

Commentary:

(RIC Va, Valerian, no. 171).

This sestertius, minted in Rome between 256 and 257 CE, depicts on the obverse the laureate head of Valerian, and on the reverse the emperor raising a woman who is likely the kneeling personification of the *orbis terrarum* (the entire world), otherwise known as the *oikoumenè* (the Greek term for the whole of the known world). The inscription on the obverse, "IMP C P LIC VALERIANVS P F AVG," refers to the emperor as *imperator*, Caesar, Publius Licinius Valerianus, Pius Felix, Augustus. Towards the middle of the third century, most of the imperial coins refer to the emperor only as *imperator*, Caesar and Augustus. Therefore, Valerian is presented as *imperator*, or commander in chief of the Roman army, chosen and elected by his soldiers, as Caesar, a title which indicates the continuity of imperial rule from Augustus onwards, and as Augustus, a title which served to emphasize the emperor's sacral standing. The inscription on the reverse, "RESTITVTOR ORBIS – SC," names the emperor as restorer of the world, with the initials SC, which stand for the words *senatus consultum*, indicating that the senate had given its consent to the minting of this bronze coin, whose value was less than the nominal one.

The reverse of the issue depicts the emperor standing on the left, holding a spear in his left hand, and raising a kneeling woman, the personification of the *orbis terrarum*. The woman probably holds a globe in her left hand which is no longer visible, and Valerian perhaps also wore a turreted crown which is also no longer visible (see below).



The iconography of the personification of *orbis terrarum* is quite similar to, and probably stemmed from the famous depiction of the Hellenistic Tychè of Antioch (see <http://museum.classics.cam.ac.uk/collections/casts/tyche-antioch> [2] and also the commentary on [Lucan, *The Civil War* I.183-203](#) [3] for the Roman adoption of her). This sculpture, which depicted a woman wearing a turreted crown, portrayed the personification of the city of Antioch (see also Sestertius depicting the head of Hadrian and the same raising a kneeling personification of the *orbis terrarum*, or the entire world (123 CE)). Indeed, this imagery was incorporated into the imagery on coins minted by other emperors (for instance, see [Denarius depicting the head of Severus Alexander and the emperor symbolically depicted as the ruler of the orbis terrarum \(224-225 CE\)](#) [4] in which the emperor wears a turreted crown and holds a globe and spear).

The depiction of the emperor raising the personification of the universe could have been intended to forward the message that Valerian had brought back order after the chaos that had previously prevailed in the *oikoumenè*. Indeed, this image can be compared to the third stage in a series of four depicting the personification of a province raised from a kneeling to a standing position by a representative of Rome. According to Jane Cody, Roman coins depicting conquering emperors as well as their conquered and defeated subjects can be divided into four distinct iconographic groups, which originated in types minted during the Republic and under Augustus. These coins centre on the conquered, often the personification of a province, and not on the conqueror, and depict the former in a continuous evolution from a totally dismal and hopeless condition after their defeat to a state of near equality. The first stage depicts the conquered people mourning or with the bound hands of a prisoner (e.g. [Denarius depicting the head of Titus and a kneeling captive \(79 CE\)](#) [5]). In the second stage, the personification of the province interacts with Rome, exemplified by the emperor himself, seeking favour. The third type, which sports iconographical elements identical to the scene depicted on the reverse of this issue, depicts the personification of the province raised from a kneeling to a standing position by a representative of Rome, and is known as the *provincia restituta* type (see also Sestertius depicting the head of Hadrian and the same raising a kneeling personification of the *orbis terrarum*, or the entire world (123 CE)). Finally, the fourth type, defined as the *provincia fidelis* type, depicts the personification of the province standing literally or figuratively next to a representative of Rome, often interacting with him on an equal footing (see Cody, "Conquerors and Conquered on Flavian Coins," p. 103-124; also Gambash, *Rome and Provincial Resistance*, p. 133).

However, while the scene depicted here is very similar to the *provincia restituta* type, there are some important differences. First, the whole universe is depicted here, not just a particular people or a province. Therefore, the focus of this issue is the whole empire, once crumbling and now restored, and not just a province, or a part of it. Indeed, between 256 and 257 CE, Valerian had good reason to show a certain optimism. In 256 CE, his younger son, Valerian II, had been appointed Caesar, or heir to the throne. His elder son, Gallienus, had been appointed as co-ruler from Valerian's accession. The succession thus seemed secure. Moreover, the frontiers looked secure too. In 255 CE, following a series of campaigns waged in Germany, issues celebrating a victory over the German tribesmen were minted. Once more in 258 CE, Valerian celebrated the apparent restoration of Roman rule over the *orbis terrarum*, minting issues celebrating victories over the Persians, albeit mentioned as Parthians, *Victoria Parthica*, and victories were celebrated once more over the Germans in coins minted between 256 and 257 CE (e.g. RIC V/I, Valerian, nos. 22, 262, 291; RIC V/I, Gallienus (joint reign), no. 452, 453; RIC V/I Gallienus (joint reign), no. 175; see Manders, *Coining Images of Power*, p. 82, and n. 88). That Valerian's military victories gave him confidence in projecting an image of world rulership is illustrated on the present coin by the fact that he holds a spear. Although Valerian would later be killed by Shapur I in captivity in 260 CE at the Battle of Edessa (making him the first Roman emperor to be killed in captivity), when the present Sestertius was minted the emperor portrayed an image of confident Roman rulership over the entire world.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Caesar](#) [6]
- [Augustus](#) [7]
- [imperator](#) [8]
- [pius felix](#) [9]
- [senatus consultum](#) [10]
- [restitutor](#) [11]
- [orbis](#) [12]



Thematic keywords:

- [Valerian](#) [13]
- [Roman rule](#) [14]
- [oikoumenè](#) [15]
- [victory](#) [16]

Bibliographical references: Cody, Jane, "[Conquerors and Conquered on Flavian Coins](#)" [17], in *Flavian Rome, Culture, Image, Text* (ed. Anthony J. Boyle, William J. Dominik; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 103-123

Gambash, Gil, [Rome and Provincial Resistance](#) [18] (London: Routledge, 2015)

Manders, Erika, [Coining Images of Power: Patterns in the Representation of Roman Emperors on Imperial Coinage, A.D. 193-284](#) [19] (Leiden - New York: Brill, 2012)

Other sources connected with this document: Numismatic item

[Denarius depicting the head of Severus Alexander and the emperor symbolically depicted as the ruler of the orbis terrarum \(224-225 CE\) \[20\]](#)

- [Read more about Denarius depicting the head of Severus Alexander and the emperor symbolically depicted as the ruler of the orbis terrarum \(224-225 CE\) \[20\]](#)

Numismatic item

[Denarius depicting the head of Titus and a kneeling captive \(79 CE\) \[21\]](#)

- [Read more about Denarius depicting the head of Titus and a kneeling captive \(79 CE\) \[21\]](#)

Text

[Lucan, *The Civil War* I.183-203 \[22\]](#)

Before the crossing of the Rubicon, Caesar met with an image of *patria*.

- [Read more about Lucan, *The Civil War* I.183-203 \[22\]](#)

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Links

- [1] https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/sites/default/files/styles/large/public/ric_0171.jpg?itok=WH0vQcKA
- [2] <http://museum.classics.cam.ac.uk/collections/casts/tyche-antioch>
- [3] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/lucan-civil-war-i183-203>
- [4] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/denarius-depicting-head-severus-alexander-and-emperor-symbolically-depicted-ruler-orbis-terrarium-224>
- [5] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/denarius-depicting-head-titus-and-kneeling-captive-79-ce>
- [6] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/caesar>
- [7] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/augustus>
- [8] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/imperator>
- [9] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/pius-felix>
- [10] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/senatus-consultum>
- [11] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/restitutor>
- [12] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/orbis>
- [13] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/valerian>
- [14] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/roman-rule>
- [15] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/oikoumen%C3%A8>
- [16] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/victory>
- [17] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/%E2%80%9Cconquerors-and-conquered-flavian-coins%E2%80%9D>
- [18] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/rome-and-provincial-resistance>
- [19] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/coining-images-power-patterns-representation-roman-emperors-imperial-coinage-ad-193-284>
- [20] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/denarius-depicting-head-severus-alexander-and-emperor-symbolically-depicted-ruler-orbis-terrarium-224>
- [21] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/denarius-depicting-head-titus-and-kneeling-captive-79-ce>
- [22] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/lucan-civil-war-i183-203>
- [23] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/erc-team/samuele-rocca>
- [24] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/erc-team/kimberley-fowler>