



Sestertius depicting the head of Antoninus Pius and the personification of Asia, celebrating the remission of the aurum coronarium (139 CE)

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[1]

Denomination:

Sestertius

Date: 139 CE

Material:

Brass (Æ)

Mint:

Rome

Name of Ruler:

Antoninus Pius

Obverse (Image and Inscription): Image: Laureate and draped bust of Antoninus Pius looking right

Inscription: ANTONINVS AVG PIVS PP

Reverse (Image and Inscription): Image: Asia, turreted, standing left, holding crown & anchor, prow left at her feet

Inscription: COS II – SC – ASIA

Commentary: (RIC III, Antoninus Pius, no. 579, p. 105).

This sestertius, minted at the beginning of the rule of Antoninus Pius, in 139 CE, depicts on the obverse the head of the emperor, and on the reverse the personification of the province of Asia. The inscription refers to the emperor as Antoninus, Augustus, Pius, *pater patriae* (father of the fatherland), and consul for the second time. The emperor assumed the consulate for the second time in the same year, 139-140 CE. The inscription on the reverse refers to the remission of the *aurum coronarium*, or “gold for crowns,” for the province of Asia. Besides, on the reverse, the initials SC, which stand for *senatus consultum*, which already appears 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. The *aurum coronarium* was initially a way for certain communities or cities to offer a gift to the emperor, as a way of expressing their loyalty. It had been customary from the second century BCE onwards, but in the late Republic the practice had begun to be abused, with Julius Caesar in 59 BCE enacting a law which decreed that the *aurum coronarium* could not be exacted if a formal triumph had not been authorised by the Senate. The issue was still problematic during the rule of Augustus (Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* 21). In the early empire, the “gold for crowns” became “institutionalised as a tax,” which each city was obliged to pay when the new emperor was enthroned, or on the occasions of anniversaries, adoption, and visits (Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty*, p. 176); the ideology behind it, however, endured, with the monies given to the emperor considered to be “voluntary” rather than forcibly enacted. As Clifford Ando has noted, “the cities of the empire were not required simply to pay the emperor and then thank him for that privilege,” as the form of the *aurum coronarium* benefitted the community from which it came too; the giving of the gift included a speech, which praised the emperor for the benefits that his rule bestowed, but which also publicly requested for his support in anything that they might seek, masking Rome’s official power to tax with a public declaration of *consensus* that demonstrated the favour with



which they might expect the emperor to respond to future requests (Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty*, p. 176).

Antoninus Pius, an emperor attentive to abuses, decreed to remit the *aurum coronarium* on the occasion of his adoption, with coinage such as this issued in reference to the event (this was quite unusual, as the remit usually occurred in celebration of succession, see Historia Augusta, *Life of Antoninus Pius* IV.10).

Various coins depicting the personification of a province were minted, including Africa, Asia, Cappadocia, Dacia, Hispania, Mauretania, Phoenicia, Scythia, Sicilia, Syria, and Thracia, as well as the city of Alexandria. Besides, two issues naming Armenia and Parthia were also minted. Asia is personified as a woman, draped in a long dress, sporting a turreted crown, and holding an anchor. The prow of a ship is depicted at her feet. The iconography of the province of Asia is clearly influenced by that of the Tych[?] of Antiochia, the statue of the Hellenistic sculptor Eutychides, which depicted the personification of the city of Antioch. The turreted crown indeed symbolised the fact that Asia was highly urbanised. Indeed, the Roman governor of this senatorial province, of proconsular rank, sat at Ephesus, by then a city, which numbered 225.000 inhabitants. Besides, the anchor and the prow of the ship indicate that most of the cities in the province were located on the sea. It is possible that Antoninus Pius had good personal reasons to remit the *aurum coronarium* to the province of Asia, as in 134-135 CE he had been the proconsular governor of the province; this emission, therefore, celebrates the relationship between the emperor and this particular province, as well as an imperial gesture of generosity, namely the remission of a heavy and unwelcome tax.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Augustus](#) [2]
- [Pius](#) [3]
- [pater patriae](#) [4]
- [consul](#) [5]
- [senatus consultum](#) [6]
- [Asia](#) [7]

Thematic keywords:

- [Antoninus Pius](#) [8]
- [tax](#) [9]
- [tribute](#) [10]
- [Greeks](#) [11]
- [city](#) [12]
- [Asia](#) [13]
- [province](#) [14]
- [Roman benevolence](#) [15]
- [generosity](#) [16]
- [turreted crown](#) [17]
- [anchor](#) [18]
- [prow](#) [19]
- [golden crown](#) [20]

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Links

- [1] https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/sites/default/files/styles/large/public/ric_0579.jpg?itok=dfJ68iBd
- [2] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/augustus>
- [3] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/pius>
- [4] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/pater-patriae>
- [5] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/consul>
- [6] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/senatus-consultum>
- [7] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/asia>
- [8] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/antoninus-pius>
- [9] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/tax>
- [10] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/tribute>
- [11] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/greeks>
- [12] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/city>
- [13] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/asia>
- [14] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/province>
- [15] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/roman-benevolence>
- [16] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/generosity>
- [17] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/turreted-crown>
- [18] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/anchor>
- [19] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/prow>
- [20] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/golden-crown>
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- [22] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/roman-historical-coins>
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