Deciphering Coin Inscriptions from the 4th Century AD

When considering a newly-cleaned coin, there are certain features that serve as good starting points in determining the correct attribution. Ancient Roman coins have tremendous variance in their themes over the centuries, and yet certain things remained constant for over seven centuries of the Empire’s existence.

All ancient Roman coins are, or were designed to be, round. Though this may seem silly to mention, not all cultures used round coins, so this is a logical first observation. Nearly every Roman coin has a portrait of an Emperor or other important Roman on one side of it. If you are very knowledgeable in ancient Roman numismatics, the portrait alone may be enough to identify the person depicted. Even so, a few coins were minted for the honor of a past ruler by that ruler’s successor. Coins were also often minted for a new ruler before the celators in the outlying provinces had a clear idea of what the ruler looked like. In those instances, the old ruler’s face may have been used with a new inscription.

That brings us to the best way to correctly attribute a coin: by its legends. Legends, or inscriptions, were placed on nearly every Roman coin and told about the ruler under whose authority the coin was issued. With even fewer exceptions, the legends were inscribed with the base of the letters inward, or to put it another way, with the tops of the letters along the outside edge of the coin. So, with a little persistence and a general idea of what to look for, one has a fair chance of attributing even coins with badly-worn legends and portraits.

Before beginning, it is good to understand a few things about the format of ancient Roman coin inscriptions. One of the first things to note is that there are seldom ever spaces between the letters. Equally important is the fact that abbreviations were used extensively. The abbreviations and absence of spaces can be a bit confusing at first, but as you learn what the common abbreviated inscriptions are you’ll quickly become proficient at deciphering the legends on your coins.

Let’s look at a common coin and its inscription.
Above, we see a coin from one of the most notoriously well-known Roman Emperor: Nero. The lines have been placed in between the abbreviated words of the inscription. Here is what each portion of the inscription means:

**NERO**: Easy enough… his name!

**CLAVD**: Perhaps less obvious than NERO but also part of his name. This stands for Claudius… the Romans had no letter “U” in their alphabet, so “V” can often be written as “U” today.

**CAESAR**: An Imperial title with its roots in the cognomen, or family name, of Julius Caesar. Adoption of this title was both an attempt to honor Julius Caesar and to add an air of legitimacy to the position . . . drawing from Julius Caesar’s wide popularity.

**AVG**: For AVGVSTVS (Augustus), the highest authority in Rome. This title was first awarded by the Senate to Octavian (ruler 33BC-14AD).

**GER**: GERMANICVS, Ruler or Conqueror of Germania
**PM**: PONTIFEX MAXIMVS, or supreme priest (literally a “bridge-maker” between the gods and people) . . . signifying that the ruler is also the chief priest of Rome.

**TR P**: TRIBVNICIA POTESTAS, Power or Potency of the Tribunate. This title was also to add legitimacy to the ruler by in effect saying, “The Tribunate is all-powerful, alive and well, and approves this ruler”.

**IMP**: IMPERATOR, essentially saying the ruler is the Commander-In-Chief of the armed forces. Also alludes to the ruler being a military hero.

**PP**: PATER PATRIAE, father of the country; could also designate PERPETVVS (Perpetuus) meaning “Lifetime appointee” (although this usage didn’t come about until the time of Domitian)

So there you have it… The full title bestowed on Nero by this coin would read,

“Caesar Augustus Nero Claudius, High Priest and Ruler of Rome and Germania, Supreme Commander of the armies of Rome, the father of his country, leader of the Triumvirate for as long as he shall live.”

Small wonder they used abbreviations! To see a full listing of the common inscriptions on Roman coins, I recommend these websites:

David Sear, noted author of one of the most commonly cited references on Roman coins, has a brief but informative page at:


Barry and Darling Ancient Coins have an extensive reference online that shows many common and not-so-common inscriptions:


A good reference by author Doug Smith exists on the Ancient Coin Mart site:


Good luck!
ACE: Anatomy of a Roman Coin II
Deciphering Coin Images
(Images courtesy of Beastcoins.com)

Obverse:
- Head facing Right
- Laureate
- Bust facing Right
- Radiate
- Diademed

Legend or inscription

Busts may also be Bare-headed.

Draped

Reverse:
- This reverse depicts a temple.
- Reverses often depict a Deity or as on the reverse

Personification, at bottom.

Cuirassed – Busts can be both draped and cuirassed, in this deified case, emperor also holds a scepter.

Reverse inscription: TEMP DIVI AVG REST
- Proclaims the restoration of the temple of the Augustus by Antoninus Pius.

Exergue = Area below Ground line on the Reverse of a coin. Common location for Mint marks (which can also identify the “officina” or workshop within the Mint) or some special legend placed there.

Reverse showing Aeqvitas the Personification Of Equity - note her “attributes”: Scales of Justice held in the right hand and scepter held in the left..

Reverse inscription: AEQVITAS AVG proclaims the equitable nature of the emperor.
ACE: Anatomy of a Roman Coin – Part III
Common Obverses and Reverses
(Courtesy of Ras Suarez & William Peters)
Common reverses and their meanings:

- **FEL TEMP REPARATIO**
  - The restoration of happy times
  - Mint of Constantinople

- **PROVIDENTIA CAESS**
  - Providence of the Caesars
  - Mint of Cyzicus

- **GLORIA ROMANORVM**
  - The glory of the Roman people
  - Mint of Cyzicus

- **VICTORIAE DD AVGG Q NN**
  - The victories of our lords and emperors
  - Mint of Siscia

- **VOT V MVLT X**
  - Vows made for five years, other vows made for ten years.
**Common Obverse Abbreviations**

**AEL** *Aelia*. Initially Aelia Flaccilla’s first name, it was used during the 5th century by the coinage of the emperor’s wife in an honorary fashion equivalent to the use of “Caesar” by their male counterparts.

**ARM** *Armeniacvs* Customarily given after a successful military campaign against Armenia.

**AVG** (short for Augustus) Indicates authority over all civil matters.

**AVGG** used to denote that there was more than one emperor ruling at the same time either jointly or simultaneously in another part of the empire. The number of “G’s” denotes how many emperors this particular emperor recognized.

**AVGVSTVS** This was the honorary title traditionally given to all emperors following Octavian, on whose accession he renamed himself after.

**BRIT** *Britannicvs* Customarily given after a successful military campaign in Britain.

**C** short for Caesar

**CAES** short for Caesar.

**CAESAR** Honorary title given to imperial princes who were next-in-line to the emperor himself. This title was initially Julius Caesar’s personal last name and it was used afterwards to honor his memory.

**CL** *Clavdivs*, a common first name.

**COS** Consulate, often followed by Roman numerals indicating the term. This denotes a largely honorary title given to the person being depicted on the coin and akin to “President” if we keep in mind that it was the case during the imperial age of Rome that the military’s Commander in Chief who held actual power with the consulate being a more or less figurehead position. The use of this term faded as emperors become more despotic and less inclined to take the Senate into consideration.

**DIVI** “of the God” (genitive case), this always denotes a posthumous issue on behalf of the deceased emperor who is being deified.

**DIVO** “to the God” (dative case) as above.

**DIVVS** “god” (nominative case) as above.

**DN** *Dominus Noster* “Our Lord”, in use from the early 4th century through the Byzantine period.

**IMP** *Imperator* This title meant the equivalent of “Commander in Chief” and is the word from which we get “emperor”.

**FL** *Flavius*, a common first name.
**GERM** *Germanicus* Customarily given after a successful military expedition against any tribe of German origin.

**IVL** *Iulianus* or *Iulivs*; short for Julian or Julius.

**IVN** short for Junior, used to distinguish from a parent emperor of the same name.

**MAX** *Maximvs* Greatest.

**NOB** *Nobilissimus* Belonging to the highest aristocratic circles.

**PART** *Parthicvs* Customarily given after a successful military expedition against the Parthians.

**PERP** *Perpetvvs* For eternity, used mostly on 5th century coins.

**PIVS** mostly used during 2nd century Roman coinage, it states that the emperor was known by his loyalty or dutifulness.

**PM** *Pontifex Maximvs* The highest religious office, a notch below being a god himself.

**PP** *Pater Patriae* Honorary “Father” of the empire.

**TRP** *Tribunicia Potestas* Tribunician Powers, the highest judicial offices.

**VAL** *Valerivs*, a common first name often used in coins of late 3rd and early 4th century.

**VIRTVS** Courage, (literally “manliness,” from the Latin word *vir* “man”; later evolved into modern concept of “virtue”