

# Flyspecking the denarii of Domitian's first year as Augustus

## Introduction

Flyspecking refers to seeing minute differences between (in this case) coins that others, perhaps even wisely, leave to the specialists who care about such things. I was looking over my first-year denarii for Domitian as Augustus and was surprised to find that I had collected 22 of these coins. While there are some common coins in this first year, my examples are either R, R2 or R3. (R3 is the highest level of rarity and means one example was known to the authors of RIC II Part one at the time of publication). In this short piece I am going to examine some mysteries surrounding the first-year coinage of Domitian, discuss the very rare and very interesting PONT denarii, and have a close look at the reverse types for these denarii. Please keep in mind that I am merely discussing coins from my collection. What follows is not meant to be an exhaustive or definitive exploration of Domitian's first year denarii.

## The Mysterious 1<sup>st</sup> year denarii of Domitian

I am very interested in the denarii of the first year because there are a few mysteries to be solved. First is the order of the groups. The order of the four groups of denarii in 81 CE discussed here comes from The Roman Imperial Coinage (RIC) II Part one (2007)<sup>1</sup>. RIC comments that the order of the groups is for convenience only.<sup>2</sup> The denarii of Group one provide the titles that Domitian would have started with immediately after his accession. These are AVG, IMP, and TR P.<sup>3</sup> So here is the mystery. If group one denarii were struck first, then why do the denarii of groups two and three omit TR P from the list of titles in the legend only to have it reappear in group four?

### Reverse Legends (Table 1)

1)TR P COS VII (Group one)
2)P P COS VII DES VIII (Group two)
3)COS VII DES VIII P P (Group three)
4)TR P COS VII DES VIII P P (Group four)

This is not the only interesting feature of these denarii. For example, when you look at groups two and three what separates them is where the P P is placed. On group two denarii the P P appears before the rest of the reverse legend<sup>4</sup>. On group three denarii the P P appears after the rest of the reverse legend. Why change the position of P P in the reverse legend? Also, since groups two and three both use the same obverse legends, is it possible that group three was

<sup>1</sup> Carradice and Buttrey "The Roman Imperial Coinage".

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>3</sup> See Table 1

<sup>4</sup> See Table 2

actually struck before group two? Group one includes another mystery. RIC 3<sup>5</sup> is a very interesting coin. It is a group one denarius so it was supposedly issued before the PONT denarii that occur in Groups two-four. However, there is also a version (RIC 3 Var.) with a Litvvs on the reverse<sup>6</sup> (Short, 2018)<sup>7</sup>. On coins with Pontifical implements such as the famous Caesar elephant denarius, the inclusion of a device such as a Litvvs represents the priestly responsibilities of the leader. If Domitian had not yet added PONT or PONTIFEX MAXIMVS, why would he have included a Lituus signifying pontifical power? The answer might be as simple as Domitian copying the reverses for Titus. Denarii are known for Titus that include the triangular frame both with and without the Lituus (RIC 124A) (Figure 3)<sup>8</sup>. If Domitian copied the other denarii for his Group one denarii, then I suppose that this one too may have been copied.

(Figures 1, 2, &3)

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<sup>5</sup> See Figure 1

<sup>6</sup> See Figure 2

<sup>7</sup> Koinon, 147.

<sup>8</sup> The coin shown is a very rare variant. This type will be published in the upcoming RIC II Addenda. This coin is currently the second one known. The other is owned by David Atherton a collector of Flavian coinage. David Atherton's coin will be the RIC reference coin.



There is yet another mystery. How did the mints manage to produce coins so quickly after the death of Titus? Titus died September 13<sup>th</sup> 81 CE. All of the denarii from the four

groups were struck between the death of Titus and the end of the year. So how did the mint manage the turn around so quickly? David Atherton comments that “There is no easy answer to this problem. The conventional wisdom states the mint shuttered in mid 80 because it was damaged to some degree during the great fire of Rome that summer. The Titus/Domitian mule, plus the fact the mint was instantly up and running for Domitian from day one, sit uneasily with that traditional view”<sup>9</sup>. While the focus of this paper is on the denarii of Domitian, there might be a clue in the bronze issues. According to David Atherton: “The mints were possibly already turning out a large output of coinage near the time that Titus died. The mint then used their resources to strike the coins of Domitian using many of the same reverse types struck for Titus. But it’s possible the mint produced bronze until Titus’ death and switched to precious metal for Domitian to cover his donatives. Perhaps the fire did damage one of the mints and the other had to do double duty”<sup>10</sup>. There is another clue in the Group 1 denarii. RIC 6<sup>11</sup> is a mule. It has an obverse for Domitian but uses a Titus reverse with TR P IX. This is very interesting because at first glance this would seem to be impossible. The TR P IX coins (RIC 100-132) were all supposedly struck before June 30 of 80 CE, because Titus assumed TR P X on July 1 of 80 CE. How then could TR P IX be used on a Domitian denarius from over one year later? Carradice & Buttrey suggest that for some reason TR P IX dies continued to be used after Titus assumed TR P X<sup>12</sup>. They also state that “Mules usually combine dies in parallel or at least in closely contemporaneous use...”<sup>13</sup>. This is all speculation of course. The actual explanation for how the coins of Domitian were produced so quickly is still a mystery. The other mystery as to why coins with TR P IX were used after Titus assumed TR P X may be solved one day but more work is to be done.

## PONT Denarii

### Obverse Legends (Table 2)

IMP CAESAR DOMITIANVS AVG (Group one)
A)IMP CAES DOMITIANVS AVG PONT (Groups two,three,& four)
B)IMP CAES DOMITIAN AVG PONT (Groups two,three,& four)
C)IMP CAESAR DOMITIANVS AVG PM (Groups two,three,& four)
D)IMP CAES DIVI VESP F DOMIT AVG PONT (Groups two & four)
E)IMP CAES DIVI VESP F DOMITIAN AVG PM (Groups two,three,& four)

Another interesting feature of these denarii is the use of PONT in the obverse legends in groups two, three, and four. If group one denarii were struck before the addition of the title PONT it makes sense that group one denarii do not include this title. However, groups two, three, and four all contain denarii that have both PONT and denarii that use PM in the obverse legends. The speculation is that PONT was used as a placeholder of sorts until

<sup>9</sup> David Atherton, Forum post on Cointalk.com August 29, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> David Atherton, Whatsap post to the author April 12, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Carradice and Buttrey “The Roman Imperial Coinage”, 266.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 185.

Domitian was formally granted the title of PONTIFEX MAXIMVS or PM. If this is the case the why do denarii in each group use both PONT and PM? Carradice and Buttrey make the following statement. “Although it would be logical for PONT (Pontifex) to precede PM, (pontifex Maximus) the former is unknown for coins of Domitian Caesar, though Titus used it under Vespasian and it is attested for Domitian Caesar epigraphically. It is also possible that Domitian after his accession used PONT until completion of the presumed religious necessities allowed him to use Pontifex Maximus. The coins do not confirm the progression from PONT to PM...”<sup>14</sup> Curtis Clay states: “As to interpretation, I don’t doubt that PONT on the denarii means that Domitian had not yet been elected Pontifex Maximus.”<sup>15</sup> Remember that these groups are ordered by the reverse legends and not the obverse legends. Group two contains only denarii and is comprised of 12 types. Of these types 9 of them contain PONT in the obverse legend. All of the coins in Group two are R2 or R3. (In other words Group two denarii are either very rare or extremely rare). In two years I have seen one come to market for sale. Unfortunately, I missed it and so I have no Group 2 Domitian denarii.

Figure 4



Figure 5

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>15</sup> Curtis Clay forum post on Forum Ancient Coins.com September 18, 2017.





I have 7 of the PONT denarii: RIC 21<sup>16</sup>, RIC 29<sup>17</sup>, RIC 31<sup>18</sup>, RIC 34<sup>19</sup>, RIC 40<sup>20</sup>, RIC 68<sup>21</sup>, and RIC 73<sup>22</sup>. RIC 21, RIC 29 and RIC 34 are in Group three; RIC 40 RIC 68 and RIC 73 are in Group four. On four of my PONT denarii (RIC 21, RIC 29, RIC 31 and RIC 40) the legend reads IMP CAES DOMITIANVS AVG PONT (Obverse legend A). On RIC 34, RIC 68, and RIC 73 the legend reads IMP CAES DOMITIAN AVG PONT (Obverse legend B). There are 10 types of Domitian denarii using DOMITIAN and 18 for DOMITIANVS. These PONT denarii use one other legend: IMP CAES DIVI VESP F DOMIT AVG PONT (Obverse legend D). I do not have an example using this legend. There are only three types with this legend and they all R2 (very few examples known). Of the group two PONT denarii 5 are obverse legend A, three are obverse legend B, and one is obverse legend D. Within the Group three PONT denarii 7 are Obverse A, three are Obverse B, and 0 examples for Obverse D. In the group four denarii, 6 are Obverse legend A, four are Obverse legend B and 2 for Obverse legend D. Within each group Obverse legend A examples are always more prevalent than Obverse legend B. Also, Obverse legend B examples are always more plentiful than Obverse legend D examples<sup>23</sup>.

Figures 6 & 7

<sup>16</sup> See Figure 4

<sup>17</sup> See Figure 8

<sup>18</sup> See Figure 5

<sup>19</sup> See Figure 6

<sup>20</sup> See Figure 7

<sup>21</sup> See Figure 9

<sup>22</sup> See Figure 10

<sup>23</sup> Information on Obverse types is derived from Carradice and Buttrey



### Reverse types

Reverse Types (Table 3)

1) Curule chair with wreath
2) Dolphin coiled around anchor
3) draped seat with winged thunderbolt
4a) Seat with semi-circular frame and three crescents
4b) Draped seat triangular or semicircular frame with corn ears (the triangular option only applies to RIC 14 in Group two)
5) Triangular frame with palmettes
6a) Tripod with fillets and dolphin
6b) Tripod with fillets, dolphin, wreath and ravens

7) The lighted altar
8a) Minerva advancing right with spear and shield
8b) Minerva standing left with Victory and sceptre with shield at feet

The reverse types<sup>24</sup> for these first year Domitian denarii re-use many of the reverses for Titus as Augustus. These reverse types include: 1) Curule chair with wreath, 2) Dolphin coiled around anchor, 3) draped seat with winged thunderbolt, 4a) Seat with semi-circular frame and three crescents, 4b) draped seat triangular or semicircular frame with corn ears 5) Triangular frame with palmettes, 6a) Tripod with fillets and dolphin and 6b) Tripod with fillets, dolphin, wreath and ravens. In Group one there is one example of reverse type one, one example of reverse type two, one example of reverse type three and two examples of reverse type 6b (one is a mule with a reverse legend for Titus). In group two a new reverse type appears for Domitian and a variation of a previous reverse type is also added. Type 7 has a lighted and garlanded altar. This and All other reverse types in Group 2 are carry overs from the reign of Titus with the exception of a modification to reverse type four which I am calling reverse type 4b. Group 2 has one example of Type 7, it is a PONT denarius Obverse legend A. Type 7, the lighted altar, also occurs in groups three and four. In group two there are four examples of reverse type one. Three of these are PONT denarii. There is one each for Obverse legends A, B, C, D. Only the Obverse legend C example is not a PONT type. There are two examples of the type two Obverse (dolphin and anchor) and both are PONT denarii. One is Obverse legend A, and one is Obverse legend B. There are two examples of reverse type 4b (draped seat triangular or semicircular frame with corn ears). One is a PONT denarius with Obverse legend A, and one uses Obverse legend C. There are two examples of reverse type 4a (Seat with semi-circular frame and three crescents). One is a PONT denarius with Obverse legend A, and one uses Obverse legend E. The use of obverse legend C which includes PM, while prominent in Groups three & four and used on both common and rare coins, is present on only two examples in Group two and both are R2. In Contrast, Obverse legend E, which also uses PM is only used on rare coins in groups two, three, and four.

Figure 8



Group three introduces us to a new type for Domitian as Augustus, the Minerva

<sup>24</sup> See Table 3



reverse. The Minerva reverse was used earlier for Domitian as Caesar. The Minerva reverse comes in 2 varieties. Reverse Type 8a) has Minerva advancing right with spear and shield. Reverse type 8b) has Minerva standing left with Victory and sceptre with shield at feet. There are only three coin types for Domitian that include Minerva with Victory and spear (RIC 29, 30, & 99). It is worth noting that while 8a) becomes the M1 type Minerva when the Minerva reverses dominate the denarii of Domitian, type 8b) does not become a standard type. I think is a shame as I quite like the Minerva with Victory reverse. In Group three, RIC records only one example for each of 8a) and 8b). In both cases they are Obverse legend A Pont denarii. RIC 29 is the group three PONT denarius with the Minerva and Victory reverse.<sup>25</sup> The altar type (Type 7) seen first in Group two is shown in two examples in group three. One is obverse legend A (a PONT denarius) and one is obverse legend C, and both are R2. Type one (Curule chair and wreath) has three denarii. There is one each from obverse groups A, B, (both are PONT denarii) and C. All are at least R2 regarding rarity. There are two denarii for type two (dolphin and anchor). One is Obverse A (a PONT denarius) and one is Obverse C. There are two examples of reverse type 4a denarii. One is obverse A (a PONT denarius) and the other is Obverse legend C. There are two more types that appear in Group three: One is reverse type three with the Thunderbolt, and the other is 6a the type with the seat semi-circular frame and three crescents. For type three there are three obverse legends used, A, B, and C. The first two are PONT denarii. For type 6a obverse types A, C, and E are used. A is a PONT denarius. All of these denarii are very rare to extremely rare. What is interesting here is that in two cases (obverse legends C and E) use PM in the legend.

Group four introduces only one new type. It is 8b) Minerva standing left with Victory and sceptre with shield at feet. There are three types of denarii that use this reverse, RIC 60, 62 and 63. There is one for Obverse A (a PONT denarius) one for Obverse C and one for Obverse E. Both Obverse legend C and E use PM in the obverse legend. However, RIC 62 with Obverse legend C is a much more common coin than RIC 63 with Obverse legend E. What is interesting is that the coins in Groups two and three that use Obverse legend C are all rare coins. In Group two Obverse legend C is sparsely used. In group three Obverse legend C is used for 8 types of denarii and all of these are rare to very rare. In Group four Obverse legend C is used for 7 types (RIC 43, 48, 54, 58, 62, 70, and 74). All of these coins are rated common. So what can we say here? The evidence supports the assumption that regardless of Obverse legend, it is the reverse legend that seems to control the relative rarity of the denarii. While true that PONT denarii are rare to extremely rare, it is telling that these rare coins appear in groups like two and three which are generally dominated by rare coins. In general, it is possible to say that Coins in Groups two, and three, are generally rarer than coins in Group four. Or perhaps we should say that Group four contains a higher percentage of common coins than at least two of the other three groups. Therefore, we can get a general idea of rarity by using the reverse legends.

Figures 9 & 10

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<sup>25</sup> See Figure 5



RIC 64 and 65 are interesting because of the reverse types they use in combination with two different Obverse legends. RIC 64<sup>26</sup> is surprisingly rare. Instead of the 3 crescents above the semi-circular frame this coin has corn ears (as is also seen on the triangular framed pulvinar type-RIC 3). This denarius has the obverse legend used on many of the more common coins in the group (IMP CAES DOMITIANVS AVG PM). RIC 64 uses 4b) draped seat, semicircular frame with corn ears while RIC 65 uses reverse type 4a) Seat with semi-circular frame and three crescents. Note that only in the case of RIC 14 in Group two does RIC offer the option of triangular or semi-circular frame. RIC 64 uses Obverse legend C) IMP CAESAR DOMITIANVS AVG PM. This legend occurs 12 times on the denarii of group four. Note that all of the common coins in group four use Obverse legend C. RIC 65 uses Obverse legend A) IMP CAES DOMITIANVS AVG PONT. Note that RIC 64 is R while RIC 65 is R2. This is not surprising as all PONT denarii are at least R2. However, just because all common coins use Obverse legend C does not mean that all coins using this obverse legend are common. RIC 64 uses Obverse legend C and is given a rarity designation of R for rare. Another interesting piece of information about these reverses is that while Groups two and four have both reverse types (4a and 4b), group three only has examples of

<sup>26</sup> See Figure 11

4a (Seat with semi-circular frame and three crescents). RIC 31 is a PONT denarius using Obverse legend A (IMP CAES DOMITIANVS AVG PONT), and RIC 32 which uses Obverse legend C (IMP CAESAR DOMITIANVS AVG PM). Both are rare coins with RIC 31 rated as R2 (as one should expect with PONT denarii), and RIC 32 rated as R for rare.

Figure 11



The other reverse types in Group four are all carried over from the reign of Titus. Perhaps this solidifies the notion that Group one had to be first because it used already existing types while all subsequent groups, regardless of the order, added types under Domitian such as Minerva with Victory which was not used by Titus and therefore not used in group one. In other words perhaps Groups two, three, and four show the beginnings of some experimentation with the coinage under a new emperor. Alas, it would not take too long for the denarii to become dominated by the Minerva reverses.

### Conclusion

I find the coins of Domitian's first year as Augustus fascinating. There are mysteries here including the use of or omission of titles, the ordering of the four groups of denarii, and the appearance that coins with PONT and those with PM instead were struck near the same time (if the groupings in RIC are correct). According to one Flavian expert, a possible explanation for this is that many of the groups were struck contemporaneously, probably due to different workshops using separate dies. Another possible explanation comes from RIC. Perhaps PONT and PM denarii were struck at the same time because "of the survival of unused PONT dies after PM was introduced"<sup>27</sup>. Coins with reverse legend two) P P COS VII DES VIII (Group two) are generally rarer than coins in groups one, three, and four. Coins with reverse legend 3) COS VII DES VIII P P (Group three) are generally rarer than coins in groups one and four. All coins with PONT in the obverse legend are rare. In fact, in groups two, three, and four where PONT denarii occur they are always at least as rare as the rarest coins of other Obverse legends. In Many cases the PONT denarii are the rarest coins in the group.

<sup>27</sup> Carradice and Buttrey "The Roman Imperial Coinage" 239

## Captions

### Figure 1

Domitian. AR denarius. Rome A.D. 81. (Group 1)

(18.15 mm, 3.36 g)

Obv: IMP CAESAR DOMITIANVS AVG, laureate head right

Rev: TR P COS VII, draped throne, back decorated with grain ears.

RIC 3 (R); BMCRE 2; RSC 554a.

Ex: William Rosenblum Coins Ex:Agora Auctions March 22, 2016 lot 52-174

Purchased from Agora Auctions March 22, 2016.

### Figure 2

Domitian. AR denarius 81 CE (Group 1)

(16.88 mm 3.02g). Rome mint, struck A.D. 81.

Obv: IMP CAESAR DOMITIANVS AVG, laureate head right

Rev: TR P COS VII, draped throne, back decorated with grain ears Lituus beneath the frame.

RIC 3 Var (R); BMC 2 Var; RSC 554a Var

Ex: Akropolis Ancient Coins June 22, 2017.

### Figure 3

TITUS (79-81), AR denarius, 80, Rome.

(18mm 3.23g )

Obv: IMP TITVS CAES VESPASIAN AVG PM· T; Head laureate right

Rev: TR P IX IMP XV- COS VIII PP; draped processional chair, triangular frame by decorated with five Palmettes, Lituus under triangular frame.

RIC 124 A; BMC 61; RSC 313a

Purchased from Jean Elsen ltd; April 18, 2019

### Figure 4

Domitian AR Denarius, 81 CE (Group 3)

(19mm 3.24g)

Rome mint, 81 AD

Obv: IMP CAES DOMITIANVS AVG PONT; Head of Domitian, laureate, bearded, r.

Rev: COS VII DES VIII P P; Curule chair, wreath above

RIC 21 (R2). Not in the RIC plates. BMC p. 299 note. RSC 58

Ex: Harry N. Sneh Collection

Ex: David Atherton Collection

Coin depicted on Wildwinds.com database

### Figure 5

Domitian AR Denarius 81 CE (Group 3)

(3.22g)

Obv: Head laureate right; IMP CAES DOMITIANVS AVG PONT

Rev: Draped seat, Semi-circular frame with crescents; COS VII DES VIII PP

RIC 31; BMC 7; RSC 59

Purchased from Munzencontor Kornblum on MA-Shops

The coin is the Best of Type in Forum Ancient Coins Best of Type Gallery.

Figure 6

Domitian AR Denarius, 81 CE (Group 3)

(19mm 3.23g)

Rome mint, 81 AD

Obv: IMP CAES DOMITIAN AVG PONT; Head of Domitian, laureate, bearded, r.

Rev: COS VII DES VIII P P; Seat, draped; above, winged thunderbolt

RIC 34 (R3). BMC -. RSC -

Ex: Harry N. Sneh Collection.

Ex: David Atherton Collection

Figure 7

Roman empire - Domitian (81-96 AD.) silver denarius

(18mm 2.87g). Rome. 81 AD

Obv: IMP CAES DOMITIANVS AVG PONT, laureate head right

Rev: TR P COS VII DES VIII P P, a lighted altar

RIC II 40. (R2) Not in the RIC plates

Purchased from Lucernae on Catawiki auctions May 2019

Figure 8

Domitian AR Denarius 81 CE (Group 3) Rome

(20mm 3.15g)

Obv: Head laureate right; IMP CAES DOMITIANVS AVG PONT

Rev: Minerva standing left with victory and spear, shield at feet; COS VII DES VIII P P

RIC 29 (R3) Not in the RIC plates

Figure 9

Domitian AR Denarius 81CE (Group 4)

(18mm 3.13g)

Obv: IMP CAES DOMITIAN AVG PONT; laureate head right

Rev: TR P COS VII DES VIII P P; seat, draped, above, a winged thunderbolt placed horizontally.

RIC 68 (R2) BMC --, RSC-- Not in the RIC plates

Figure 10

Domitian, AR Denarius 81-96 CE. (81 CE Group 4)

(19mm 3.3g)

Obv: Laureate head right; IMP CAES DOMITIAN AVG PONT

Rev: Tripod with fillets; dolphin above; TR P COS VII DES VIII P P

RIC: 73 (R3) Not in the RIC plates

Purchased from Barakat Gallery Los Angeles

Figure 11

Domitian AR Denarius 81 CE (Group 4) Rome

(18.5mm 3.20g)

Obv: Laureate head right, IMP CAES DOMITIANVS AVG PM

Rev: Seat draped, above semi-circular frame decorated with corn ears; TR P COS VII DES VIII PP

RIC 64 (R), BMC --, RSC--

Savoca Auctions 6<sup>th</sup> Blue Auction October 5, 2019 Lot 835



Table 1  
Reverse legends from the Domitian denarii of 81 CE

Table 2  
Obverse legends from the Domitian denarii of 81 CE

Table 3  
Reverse types from the Domitian denarii of 81 CE

## Bibliography

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