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# ACTA NUMISMATICA HUNGARICA

## I

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# A mysterious Gallienus bronze coin with SPES PVBLICA reverse

Tamás FEHÉR

The rule of Gallienus is an exciting part of the history of Roman coinage. Decline of the *antoninianus* and generally, the monetary system. Decentralization of minting through opening new mints in the empire. Disappearance of S C from bronze denominations. Long traditions came to an end during those 15 years. I found a rarity in a private collection that may help us to better understand what happened in those years. I am presenting the third<sup>1</sup> known and the best preserved specimen of an unusual type (*Fig. 1*).



*Fig. 1 The third specimen (courtesy of a private collector, photo by Cs. Gedai)*

*Obverse:* IMP GALLIENVS P AVG

Laureate, cuirassed bust facing right, seen from the front. Gallienus wears 'chin curtain' type beard.

*Reverse:* SPES PVBLICA

Spes advancing left, holding flower and raising the hem of her skirt.

*Diameter:* 23–25 mm

*Thickness:* 2–3 mm

*Weight:* 10.5 g

*Die axis:* 350°

*RIC:-; GNECCHI:*<sup>2</sup> 287 (Tav. 154/20); *GÖBL:*<sup>3</sup> 827

Centrally struck, dark brown patina.

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1 At the beginning of the research I had been aware of two specimens only, the Monti and another one being in a private collection. In the meantime, another specimen was found which was sold in 2006 in Gorny & Mosch Auction 147 (object number 2275). This is referred to hereinafter as the 'Gorny specimen' and the one I am presenting is the 'third specimen' since chronologically it came to light later.

2 GNECCHI 1912.

3 GÖBL 2000.





Fig. 2 Antoninianus, RIC 399  
(Photo: Auktionshaus H. D. Rauch  
GmbH, e-Auction 20 no. 456)

The portrait was engraved in a professional way, detailed, good quality work. However, the eyes are disproportionately big, the lower jaw is disproportionately small. The upper part of the head, the relatively tall forehead and the flat scalp are squaring. The closest parallel I have found is a copy of a RIC 399 *antoninianus* (Fig. 2), no doubt that the master should have been the same as the one engraving our SPES PVBLICA. (A remarkable difference is the dots under the beard and on the cuirass.) Considering the style of the obverse letters, some of them (M, P, A, E, N and V) have a slight cursive character, but leftward slant. Letter M does not look well-designed, it was engraved as IVI actually. The IMP GALLIENSVS P AVG obverse legend was not in use for imperial bronze denominations (I have found two exceptions only), however, it was applied in the Viminacium provincial coinage, practically on *sestertii* in local era year XVI (254–255).

Unlike the portrait, Spes on the reverse is a high-level, schematic engraving: e.g. the eye is a mere dot. On the third specimen, the belt and the eye of Spes is almost invisible in spite of the fact that it is in better condition than the second known copy, the Gorny one (Fig. 3). This means that the lack of the belt on the reverse could not be caused by wearing in circulation but it was due to the deterioration of the reverse die in the course of the production. The other atypical thing about the legend is that on the reverse, the S C abbreviation is missing, although it was quite common on bronze coins during the joint reign (with his father, Valerian between 253 and 260).<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 3 The Gorny specimen  
(Photo: Gorny & Mosch GmbH,  
Auction 147 no. 2275)

All three currently known specimens were struck with the same die pair, this is clear from the position of the inscriptions and the figures. The Monti one seems to be published based on its plaster cast and the photos were taken and printed more than a hundred years ago, so it does not really help us when trying to analyze the details. In addition, it is not available anymore.<sup>5</sup> Fortunately, the Gorny one was in very fine condition and good quality photos are available. The third one is in extremely fine condition and I have had the opportunity to examine the coin itself. The different weights (Monti 7.5 g, Gorny 9.2 g) prove that we are facing three different specimens.

Going back to the first known copy, in Gnecci's publication the provenance was indicated as 'Monti e Laffranchi' for all coins of that collection. The SPES PVBLICA was also marked as such. Today, this may be misleading as it may suggest that Gnecci found two specimens. Pompeo Monti was the uncle of Lodovico Laffranchi, they both were numismatists and collectors of Roman coins, living in Milan. They had a joint collection at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which was solely owned by Laffranchi after the death of

4 'S C' disappeared a few years later during the sole reign. Based on SEAR 2005 chronology, types introduced in 260 all wear this abbreviation, those started to be produced in 262 do not. The change must have been sometime in 261 since certain types have S C whilst it is missing on others. (It returned for a while under Florianus, then disappeared for good.)

5 This coin disappeared from the Laffranchi collection after the death of the collector in 1952 along with other rarities. For this piece of information, thanks to Dr. Rodolfo Martini, head of Gabinetto Numismatico e Medagliere in Milan. It was also him who made the MONTI 1906 article available to me.

Monti. Accordingly, there should have been only one single specimen there, published in 1912. During my research I found an article about the Monti collection from January 1906,<sup>6</sup> already including this coin with photos on the obverse and reverse. There is no provenance mentioned, therefore, we can establish that it was in the Monti collection since 1905 at the latest. What is confusing is that there seems to be differences between the pictures published in 1906 and 1912 about the same specimen (*Fig. 4a and 4b*) E.g. the curve of the laurel wreath looks definitely different on the obverses. Anyway, there is no reason to think that there were two specimens in the Monti-Laffranchi collection. Alterations might be caused by the fact that separate plaster casts were made for the two publications, the earlier one is definitely of poorer quality as well as the photo or reprography taken of it. The Gorny specimen is an auctioned one and it is not possible to learn more about its provenance. In case of the third specimen, however, the place where it was found is more or less known, this was the military town of Brigetio, Pannonia Inferior (today Komárom, Hungary), close to the western wall of the legionary camp of Legio I Adiutrix.



Fig. 4a. The Laffranchi specimen in 1906



Fig. 4b. The Laffranchi specimen in 1912

The fact that we have a specimen with exact provenance makes it possible to investigate it from the local coin circulation perspective. By the time of the joint reign, the civil town of Brigetio (*Colonia Brigetionensia*) had been abandoned, there are no coins found on excavations from this period. Therefore, the analysis of the coin circulation can only be applicable to the legionary camp and to the military town (*canabae*) where the coin was actually found.

Looking at the coin circulation figures during the joint reign in Brigetio, it can clearly be seen that both imperial and provincial bronze denominations of the Valerian dynasty are simply missing, there is only one single *as* out of almost 100 pieces found in that period.<sup>7</sup> The rest are *antoniniani*, naturally. Although this was also the case for preceding emperors (Trebonianus Gallus, Traianus Decius etc.), Viminacium regularly issued its products to compensate for the lack of imperial bronzes. This phenomenon is not Brigetio specific, this is rather valid for whole Pannonia. Nevertheless, in the collector catalogues (Kampmann, Sear), which rather represent the rarity levels of the western part of the empire, the prices show that the 'normal', imperial bronze denominations, especially during the joint reign, were not as rare as the Pannonian figures are showing it. Anyway, imperial bronze coins, just like our SPES PVBLICA must have been unusual in Brigetio those years.

The obverse legend is linked to the joint reign of Valerian and Gallienus and it must have been struck in a European mint since the portrait does not show Syrian characteristics,

6 MONTI 1906.

7 FMRU III 234–238, 319–321, 407–408. BAKOS–LÁNYI–TORBÁGYI 1994 and local private collections. Coins found during the excavations in the camp and the *canabae* in 2014 also support this, coins found in 2015 and 2016 have not been analysed yet.



where imperial mints were in operation outside Europe at that time. The *antoninianus* struck with the same obverse legend and reverse (RIC 403, Fig. 5) could help us in specifying the place and the time of minting. The *antoninianus* and its bronze 'variant' are very similar to each other, it is quite probable that they were struck in the same mint or at least the reverse dies are the products of the same officina. (Göbl attributes both denominations to the same mint, Viminacium.) However, opinions on RIC 403 are different as follows.



Fig. 5 *Antoninianus*, RIC 403  
(Photo: of Beast Coins, LLC, ex  
Dan Hoffman collection)

	Mint	Time
Voetter <sup>8</sup>	Tarraco	253–260
Laffranchi <sup>9</sup>	Mediolanum	257–260
Alföldi 1967	Mediolanum	?
RIC V/1	Mediolanum	259–260
Göbl 2000	Viminacium	253–255
Doyen 1985	Viminacium	?
Sear 2005	Mediolanum <sup>10</sup>	257
Fitz 2001	Viminacium	254–256
C. Clay <sup>11</sup>	Raetia/Northern Italy	?

Although currently there seems to be a consensus on Viminacium based on the research of the recent decades, the time of minting is less commonly agreed. Coin hoards containing RIC 399 and 403 may help us in finding the probable timeframes. If we have a look at the biggest Pannonian *antoninianus* hoards closing during the joint reign including these two types, we can see the following figures.

**Nagyvenyim:** 122 *antoniniani* from the joint reign, 2 pcs of RIC 399 and 3 pcs of RIC 403<sup>12</sup>

**Kistormás:** 362 *antoniniani* from the joint reign, 2 pcs of RIC 399 and 6 pcs of RIC 403<sup>13</sup>

**Tengelic:** 502 *antoniniani* from the joint reign, 4 pcs of RIC 399 and 2 pcs of RIC 403c<sup>14</sup>

8 VOETTER 1900, 139. Tav. XV, n. 64.

9 MONTI 1906 and MONTI-LAFFRANCHI 1905. From this latter article it seems that the Tarraco vs. Mediolanum dispute was between a larger group of Austrian and Italian numismatists. Interesting that several decades later, another Austrian scholar (Göbl) came to challenge Mediolanum as mint.

10 Although this is not an argument in terms of the mint at all, both coins can be linked to Mediolanum indirectly. The Monti one, as mentioned, used to be in a Milanese collection probably since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The other one was found in the military town of Brigetio, very close to the legionary camp of Legio I Adiutrix. It is not so hard to assume that the coin was left by a soldier soon after it was minted, as its extremely fine condition suggests. This legion fought in the battle of Mediolanum in 259 led by Gallienus, just after the estimated time of minting (according to GONZALES 2003, 731. I did not have the chance to verify this source myself.)

11 <http://www.forumancientcoins.com/board/index.php?topic=79207.0>

12 FITZ 2001.

13 BÍRÓNÉ SEY 1963.

14 ALBEKER-BÍRÓNÉ SEY 1969–1970, 18–21. Only the Hungarian part of Pannonia was considered, thanks to István Vida for giving an insight into the register of coin hoards compiled by him. I need to note here that there is one big hoard (Nagyberki) where RIC 399, 403 and Saloninus coins are also present, but this fact should not make a difference.

Even if we do not go into the quite uncertain chronology of every single type the hoards are consisting of, it is worthwhile to note that none of them is of Saloninus *caesar* who was elevated to this rank in the spring or summer of 258. The size of these hoards, if hidden in 259 or later, should allow the presence of Saloninus issues. Therefore, I think they were likely to be buried in or before 258.

If we say that RIC 399, 403 and the SPES PVBLICA were minted approximately during the same period of time, they must have been started to be produced in 258 at the latest, but most probably even before. I claim at least that it is significantly more probable that they were minted in 258 or before than in 259 or in 260.

In case of an imperial bronze coin without S C, one may automatically classify it as 'medallion' (whatever this notion means). I would not like to open or continue the dispute around the definition of 'medallion'.<sup>15</sup> Instead of sticking to categorisation, I am rather interested in the purpose of striking this SPES PVBLICA.

More precisely, for me the question is whether this piece had a celebrative/commemorative or monetary function. Or both. It is hard to imagine that a piece of bronze, smaller than a usual *as* with the obverse and the reverse of an ordinary *antoninianus* would have any prestigious role (please remember that the Monti specimen is 7.5 g only). It is even harder to consider it as a celebrative issue if we take a look at a 'genuine' SPES PVBLICA medallion from the joint reign<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 6 and 7).



Fig. 6. SPES PVBLICA bronze medallion from the joint reign (Photo: HOLMES 2005)



Fig. 7. SPES PVBLICA bronze medallion from the joint reign (Photo: Auktionshaus H. D. Rauch GmbH, Auction 95 no. 591)

Now for the monetary function, this makes more sense to me. It is important to note here that there are at least three known *quinarii* (Fig. 8.)<sup>17</sup> and one *denarius*<sup>18</sup> with this SPES PVBLICA reverse. Therefore, it seems like we have a series with *as*, *quinarius*, *denarius*, *antoninianus* where this latter is relatively common whilst the other denominations are extremely rare.

And this is the point where I have to mention that there are some other *asses* and one *sestertius* from the joint reign with the same characteristics i.e. with no S C on the reverse and also only a very few specimen are known, probably struck with the same dies.<sup>19</sup> Each has its own 'brother' made of silver, they are quite common *antoniniani*. Therefore, it is clear that this SPES PVBLICA is not a unique phenomenon, but a part of something wider as if the mint started to produce 8-10 types in bronze with one single die pair each, then the initiative was stopped.

15 A good summary of this topic, written upon the publication of three catalogues on Roman medallions is ESTIOT 2015, 613–614.

16 HOLMES 2005.

17 RIC 413; KING 2005, 373. I am grateful to Jean-Marc Doyen (Université de Lille) for drawing my attention to these silver issues also analysed by him (DOYEN 1985).

18 RIC 414, presented by Auguste de Belfort in the *Annuaire de la Société Française de Numismatique et d'archéologie* 1886, 442.

19 Listed by Curtis Clay on 2 April 2012 at: <http://www.forumancientcoins.com/board/index.php?topic=79207.0>

I do not really like papers which generate more questions than they actually answer. But this time I might do the same. Personally, I am convinced that the coin at hand was minted due to monetary reasons, however, I would not like to start guessing about the reason it was minted. Nevertheless, I think it is worthwhile to mention here István Vida's idea, who was great help to me during the whole research. The title of this article used to be 'A mysterious Gallienus *as* with SPES PVBLICA reverse'. Then he checked all Viminacium provincial *sestertii* preserved in the Coin Cabinet of the Hungarian National Museum. 113 coins struck under the



Fig. 8 Quinarius (Photo: King 2007, 373/8b)



Fig. 9 Denarius, Göbl Aufbau V/1 (Photo: Numismatik Lanz München, Auction 16 no. 602 and Auction 100 no. 347)

joint reign, weights are between 5.7 g and 14.3 g, with an average of 9.8 g (Viminacium *sestertii* underwent a serious reduction since the time of Gordian III, whilst imperial ones more or less kept the standard). The average weight of the three SPES PVBLICA is 9.1 g even if three specimens are not a real statistical sample. In his opinion it is possible that after stopping the production of the local *sestertii* in year XVI (254–255), the mint continued to produce bronze coins based on the former, provincial weight standard along with classic silver denominations (*quinarii*, *denarii*, Fig. 8 and 9). The reason for the rarity of these bronze coins might be the closure of the Viminacium mint soon afterwards. The lack of SC on the reverse should be due to the fact that they were not produced by a senatorial, but an imperial mint.

The primary purpose of this paper was to present this well-preserved specimen of this extremely rare coin. And the secondary purpose was to re-open the topic of these unusual issues minted during the joint reign. I hope that this article may generate another wave of investigation and discussion and finally, it will help us to better understand and specify the chronology and the history of Gallienus' coinage.

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