

# CONGIARIA AND LIBERALITATES

## CASH DISTRIBUTIONS TO THE PEOPLE

by

Carl W.A. Carlson

Curator of Numismatics

The Johns Hopkins University

From the period of the Roman Republic on, victorious generals who brought great amounts of war booty home with them made special distributions of money to the citizens of Rome, usually on the occasion of their triumph. One might, in some ways, regard this as the final distribution of the dividends from the growing empire owned by the Roman People. Under the emperors this practice of cash distributions slowly expanded, matching the increase in the donatives given to the army. Known at first as *congiaria* from the Roman term *congiarius*, a measure for liquids such as oil or wine in which some of the earliest gifts to the people had been made, they were contrasted to the *modius*-symbol of the corn-dole (a purely welfare maneuver) and to the *donativa* of the soldiers. These cash distributions were sporadic in nature and amount as well as in time, though there was a tendency to increase their size as the years passed. At first they do not appear on coins, though we have other sources of information concerning their occurrence and size. Apart from coins and the standard Roman historical writers we have a specialized source of information concerning the total amount per recipient given by each emperor during his reign: the late Roman author known as "The Chronographer of 354 A.D.," published in Mommsen's *Chronica Minora*. Unfortunately, the Chronographer does not give us the total cost to the Treasury of these distributions during any reign, nor does he supply the number of recipients. Once the distributions, or *congiaria*, begin to be recorded on coins — the first such issues are under Nero — we can begin to analyze the working of the system more accurately. With the addition of information concerning the exact details of one of the *congiaria* we can form an impression of the effect of the system on the Treasury and the Empire. This article will deal with known *congiaria* of the various emperors, the ones represented on coins, the peculiarities and shifts in metal and type of those coins, and such other information as may be available, as well as an attempt to estimate the cost of the system for such periods as are documented.

The term used for these distributions of cash to the citizens, *congiarium*, is the only one which shows up on coins from Nero through Trajan. Hadrian first changes to the more commonly used name for the series, *liberalitas*, an autocratic word implying direct, unearned beneficence on the part of the emperor. Under Antoninus and Marcus Aurelius, the two terms are used together (though not on the same coin); after the death of Verus in 169 the old *congiarium* term vanishes forever from the coinage. The terms may be used interchangeably for practical purposes, but most collectors are more familiar with *liberalitas* since the *congiarium* coins of the earlier emperors are extremely scarce.

The early years of the system (up to Nero) are unrepresented on coins; from Nero through Nerva the

number of instances of liberalities is so limited that the subject can be treated in outline:

Augustus: 5 liberalities for a total per recipient of 460 denarii; probably four occasions at 100 denarii and one at 60.

Tiberius: 72½ denarii per person, probably upon a single occasion.

Caligula: 72½ denarii per person, also probably upon a single occasion (for both emperors, probably at accession.)

Claudius: 75 denarii, also probably at accession.

Nero: 100 denarii, but since his coins record 2 liberalities he probably distributed 50 at each occasion.

Vespasian: 75 denarii, presumably at accession.

Titus: unknown amount (defective manuscript), but probably denarii.

Domitian: 75 denarii. His coins show 2 liberalities, but this probably includes participation in Titus'. The 75 probably represents his distribution as sole emperor.

Nerva: 75 denarii, again probably at accession. He also instituted a burial fund for the urban poor of 62½ denarii.

The great age of the liberality system begins with Trajan, doubtless due to the booty from the Dacian and Parthian Wars. His coins record only three distributions, in 98, 103, and 105(?), but we can be quite certain that there were several more: his listed total is 650 denarii per recipient, and we know from Cassius Dio that the distribution of 200 denarii at one time under Marcus Aurelius was the largest single liberality up to that time. There must certainly have been liberalities of Trajan after the 2nd Dacian War as well as during the Parthian campaigns, but our records on coins do not indicate them (the Mint must have felt there were more important matters to record during those years.) From Nero through Trajan, all coins recording these distributions use the term *congiarium*, and all occur only on sestertii (making it likely that the sestertius was the primary coin distributed, rather than denarii.) In addition, all use the type of the "congiarium scene," the emperor and attendants on a platform with a citizen standing below it ready to receive the money from a figure representing Liberality. This figure carries, usually in the right hand, an object often described as either an abacus or a tessera. It was established conclusively a few years ago (though the source of the information escapes me) that this is incorrect: the object in question is a measuring device which automatically counted coins, a flat tray like a modern coin tray with shallow holes in it, probably in multiples of five or ten. If there were, for example, 25 holes, then for a liberality of 75 denarii paid in that coin the person making the distribution would dip the tray into a bag of coins three times for each recipient, making certain each time that each hole was filled by only one coin. This would greatly facilitate distributions.

Hadrian introduced several new factors to the coinage issues commemorating the liberalities, the first of them being the term "liberalitas" itself. This term is used in place of *congiarium* from his very first distribution upon his accession, and *congiarium* never appears on his coins. He was also the first to strike issues in silver and gold commemorating his liberalities, probably indicating payment in those metals for the first time (barring unrecorded use of denarii from Trajan during his large distributions in the later years.) For the first time, especially on the smaller silver and gold coins (possibly because of their smaller flans), Hadrian's coins use the personification of Liberalitas without the full scene, though others of his coins make use of the traditional type. The Chronographer says he distributed a total of 1000 denarii per person during his reign; this was divided among at least seven occasions. Coins record his 1st, possibly his 2nd, his 3rd, 4th, 6th, and 7th liberalities. The 6th liberality marks the first use of gold coins bearing these types.

We know of nine liberalities under Antoninus Pius, all recorded on coins. Gold coins were issued for at least seven of these. In addition, on at least three occasions including his final distribution in 160-161, coins were issued using the term *congiarium* again as well as ones with *liberalitas*. Our sources indicate a total expenditure of 800 denarii during these nine occasions. His distributions were probably in terms of 75, 100, and/or 150 denarii per time, the majority being 75. For their first four liberalities, Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus operated jointly. Gold was issued on their 1st (their joint accession) and 4th (the Armenian victory,) and the term *congiarium* reappears on Aurelius' 3rd and 4th and Verus' 4th. This fourth liberality, in 167 A.D., marks the last appearance of the term *congiarium* in the history of the coinage. Our sources allow us to develop further data concerning Marcus' liberalities: Verus is listed at 400 denarii, and he gave on four occasions, so the first four liberalities (their joint ones) were almost certainly of 100 denarii each. Since Marcus' listed total is 850 denarii, his last three distributions (after Verus' death) involved 450 denarii. Dio tells us that the distribution in 175, upon the promotion of Commodus to Caesar the return of the Emperor to Rome, was 200 denarii, the largest sum given to that date upon a single occasion. The remaining two liberalities, in 169 (funeral of Verus?) and 177 (Commodus' promotion to Augustus) were probably for 100 and 150 denarii respectively. In addition, since Dio's words specify "8 aurei per man," it is significant that Marcus' 6th liberality (the large one of 175) is recorded on gold coins. Commodus' coins record 9 liberalities, though his first two were under Marcus and were included in Marcus' total costs. He made seven distributions as sole emperor, at least four of them including gold coins in the types. We know his total was 850 denarii over these seven occasions. Our sources indicate he was "in the habit" of giving distributions of 140 denarii, meaning he did so on several occasions. With these figures in mind, and emphasizing the value of the distribution for occasions for which gold coins were issued, we might venture, for his seven liberalities in order, totals of: 140; 75; 140; 75; 140; 140; 140. This totals to 850 denarii. All the Antonine emperors used both the "liberality scene" and the personification of Liberalitas variously upon their issues.

Pertinax, though only a brief occupant of the throne, is listed at a total of 150 denarii, presumably on a single occasion, doubtless his accession. His coins show both the scene and the personification types. Note that the value of the separate liberalities shows a tendency to increase from time of Trajan on. Whereas most of the 1st Century liberalities had been for 75 denarii (or even less), most of the 2nd Century ones had been moving in the direction of 100 to 150 denarii. Inflation, increasing wealth of the Antonine emperors, and probably a natural tendency to try to treat previous high values as some sort of average value for future occasions all contributed to this increasing drain on the Treasury.

Septimius Severus, as a result of income from confiscations, fines, and the immense booty of the Parthian Wars, as well as the need to ingratiate himself with the people, reached a total of 1100 denarii during six liberalities, all recorded on coins, all but the 4th (204 A.D., the year of the *Ludi Saeculares*) appearing on gold issues. We know from Dio that the 3rd liberality, in 202 on the occasion of Severus' 10th anniversary on the throne and the return of the Emperors from the Parthian Wars and their visits in the East, was for 250 denarii (10 aurei) per man and was the largest ever given up to that date. In view of the status of the Treasury during the war years, the issue for which no gold was struck, and the importance to Severus of dynastic matters, the most likely values for his six liberalities would be as follows:

- #1 - 193 A.D., accession - 100 denarii.
- #2 - 196 A.D., Caracalla's promotion to Caesar - 100 denarii.
- #3 - 202 A.D., Decennalia - 250 denarii.
- #4 - 204 A.D., *Ludi Saeculares* dominates the coinage - 200 denarii.
- #5 - 205 A.D., - joint consulships of Caracalla and Geta - 250 denarii.
- #6 - 209 A.D., promotion of Geta to Augustus - 200 denarii.

Dio's information about the 3rd liberality gives us a definitive grasp of data not otherwise available: he specifies not only 250 denarii per man, but also states that the total expense was 50,000,000 denarii. This gives us a figure of 200,000 recipients, about 20% of the total population of Rome at that time but much closer to 100% of the male citizens. This figure is probably larger than the number under the Julio-Claudians and Flavians, but probably about right for the distributions under the Antonines and Severans (and later.) Working across 17 years of Severus' reign (193-209) with these figures, his total expenditure came to 220,000,000 denarii. This averages to nearly 13,000,000 denarii per year, enough to pay the salaries each of those years of about 26,000 legionaries, or about 4½ full-strength legions. This during a period of increased military expenditure! It gives us a far better idea of the drain on the Treasury and the Empire represented by the liberality system. When we add in the immense cost of the corn and oil doles (the latter instituted by Severus) the annual expenses for Rome itself must have been nearly equal to the total military budget of the Empire.

Caracalla is listed at 400 denarii, though his coins show liberalities numbered from 4 through 9. The discrepancy is due to his assumption of Septimius' liberality numbers, (a





Sestertius of Trajan. "Congiarium Tertium,"  
ca. 105-6 A.D.



Denarius of Hadrian. His 6th liberality.



Sestertius of Hadrian. 1st use of term  
"Liberalitas" 118 A.D.



Denarius of Antoninus Pius. His 9th and  
last liberality. 160-161. "Liberalitas."



Denarius of Antoninus Pius. His 9th and  
last liberality. 160-161 A.D. "Congiarium."



Sestertius of Marcus Aurelius. His 3rd  
liberality. 165 A.D.



Sestertius of Marcus Aurelius. His 4th  
liberality. 167 A.D. Last use of  
"congiarium."



Denarius of Commodus. His 9th and last  
liberality. 192 A.D.



Denarius of Elagabalus. His second  
liberality. 219 A.D.



Denarius of Geta. His 5th liberality. 211 A.D.



Denarius of Geta. detail of "abacus" held by Liberalitas.



Aureus of Macrinus. detail of "abacus" held by Liberalitas



Aureus of Macrinus. Liberalitas scene. 217-218 A.D.



Gordian III, antoninianus. His 2nd liberality, probably 238 A.D. upon accession.



Antoninianus of Philip I. His 2nd liberality. ca. 245 A.D.



Sestertius of Philip II. His 3rd liberality, ca. 247 A.D. Variation on "scene" type.



policy also followed by Geta,) minus one (e.g., Caracalla's 4th liberality is the same date as Severus' 5th (and Geta's 3rd.) Thus he had only four liberalities after his father's death (his numbers 6 through 9.) Of these, he shared the earliest (his 6th and Geta's 5th) with his brother. Gold coins were issued for this liberality and also for Caracalla's 9th (and final) distribution. Since his total for these occasions is 400 denarii, it is probable that each of the four occasions involved the distribution of 100 denarii. Despite the high values of the liberalities of Severus as a precedent, the lower value for his son's liberalities is not inconsistent (despite such precedent) with his known dislike of the Senate and the people and his preoccupation with military matters and army salary raises. Geta's sole liberality after Severus' death, the one marking the accession of the brothers in 211 (Geta's 5th and Caracalla's 6th), must have been for 100 denarii, shared with his brother. He did not survive to make any further joint distributions. Macrinus gave only once during his short reign, apparently 150 denarii. This is recorded on the coins, including gold issues. Elagabalus gave four liberalities, though his total was only 250 denarii. However, his first liberality (not commemorated on coins) was either given at Antioch and the value not known to the Chronographer or else (as he did with the title of Consul) he took over Macrinus' liberality as being his own since he regarded himself as the lawful occupant of the throne. This would mean that he really had only three liberalities that counted. His 3rd, on the occasion of his marriage to Julia Paula, was restricted to senators, their wives, and certain of the equestrians, the army and people merely being banqueted at public expense. I doubt if this occasion counted in the 250 denarii total. The most likely assumption for the distribution of that total would be: his 2nd liberality, in 219 upon his entry at Rome, at 150 denarii (this is the only liberality of Elagabalus for which gold coins are known,) and his 4th, on the promotion of Severus Alexander to Caesar in 222, at 100 denarii.

Alexander, credited with a total of 600 denarii, gave 5 liberalities during his reign, of which the 1st, 2nd, 4th, and 5th are known on gold (all show up on coins of one or another denomination.) His first, upon accession, was probably for 150 denarii, as may have been the one for his marriage (2nd?); the other three should have been for 100 denarii each. His successor, Maximinus, is recorded on coins with a single liberality, almost certainly upon his accession; it is known in gold. His listed total is 150 denarii, which is proper for an accession liberality by this time. Both scene and personification types are still in parallel use. Balbinus and Pupienus, probably trying to buy support at Rome from the people, gave a single liberality (as far as is known from coins) which must have been for their listed total, 250 denarii, the first liberality that large in more than 30 years. Gordian III was included in this occasion as Caesar (also on coins); during his sole reign he made four further liberalities and is listed at 350 denarii. Gold was issued for his accession liberality, so that one was probably his largest. His 5th liberality is from a slightly suspect reference and may not have occurred. If he really had only four (including only 3 as emperor,) then values of 150 (accession), 100, and 100 denarii would fit.

Philip I and II combined total 350 denarii though we are in some doubt as to the number of occasions involved (coins show only 3 liberalities for the father, but 4 for the son.) If we assume that four is correct (and it could easily be a misreading in sources) we are forced below 100 denarii for the first time since Commodus, not a likely proposition. With only three, however, the problem is simplified: 100 (possibly) denarii for Philip I's accession, then 150 for the second, which marks Philip II's accession and is the only one for which gold is known, leaving 100 denarii for the third liberality. Trajan Decius, listed at 250 denarii, is represented on coins with only one liberality, doubtless his accession. Trebonianus Gallus is shown on coins with 1st and 3rd liberalities (no 2nd) and Volusian shows only one. Their total being listed as 250 denarii, it is again possible that there has been a misreading for the "3rd" liberality and that their sole occasion was 250 denarii on accession.

Valerian I and Gallienus seem to have been listed together, though the total, 1250 denarii, is given Gallienus' name. At least three liberalities of the joint emperors are known, the 1st and 3rd in gold. We can assume 250 for the first, and probably also for the third. Gallienus may have given several more times after Valerian was captured by the Persians, but I would suspect two further occasions not recorded on coins. This would provide a total of 5 liberalities, each at 250 denarii. Valerian II seems to have been included in one of Gallienus' liberalities since he has coins bearing the legend and type. Postumus and Tetricus I are listed on coins as having given liberalities, but since they are outside the main course of Empire the Chronographer takes no notice of them. Claudius Gothicus, however, is listed at a total of the by-now-familiar 250 denarii and is recorded on coins with a single liberality, certainly upon his accession. Aurelian, who has no liberality coinage, is listed by the Chronographer with a total of 500 denarii; probably 250 on accession and 250 on the overthrow of Palmyra or the recovery of Gaul. No figures are listed, nor is there any coinage of the liberality type, for Tacitus, Probus, and Carus; Carinus and Numerian jointly are listed at 500 denarii, and Carinus, at least, shows a coin type for a liberality. Probably 250 were distributed upon their joint accession after the death of Carus and another 250 by Carinus after the death of Numerian. Though Diocletian and Maximianus are listed at 1550 denarii, and Constantius and Galerius at 1500, no liberality coins of any of the Tetrarchy are known. Oddly enough, the last known issue of the traditional liberality coinage, using, in fact, the scene which had figured on the very earliest congiarium issues of Nero, is Carausius, rebel in Britain, at a time when his "colleagues" in Rome had abandoned the types forever.




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## REMINDER

THIS IS THE LAST ISSUE OF VOLUME VI

DID YOU RENEW MEMBERSHIP  
FOR 1975-1976?

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