

## Aurelian's *Bellum Monetarium*: An Examination

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The ancient writer Eutropius described the emperor Aurelian, who reigned from A.D. 270 to 275, as a ruler who was “necessary, rather than kind in any way.”<sup>1</sup> Certainly Aurelian has garnered a reputation as a vigorous and harsh reformer, a man who made an honest attempt to grapple with the problems besetting the Empire in the mid- to late-third century. One of the areas in which he introduced reforms, first in a limited way in A.D. 271 and then more fully in A.D. 274, was the monetary system. Aurelian attempted to check the process of debasement which had been underway for roughly half a century, most importantly by establishing standards for silver content and consolidating bureaucratic control of the mints themselves.

However, the history of the Roman coinage under Aurelian includes another, rather more bizarre event than merely his attempts at reform, for the emperor was required to suppress an extraordinarily violent uprising by the workers at one of the empire’s mints; Alaric Watson goes so far as to describe the revolt as “some of the most appalling scenes of violence the city had witnessed since the last decades of the republic.”<sup>2</sup> Although the event is mentioned in a number of ancient sources, an examination of the historical evidence shows that there is very little about the incident that can be stated securely. The preceding circumstances, the facts of the uprising itself, and the aftermath all raise serious questions about what actually occurred. Even the date and site of

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<sup>1</sup> Eutrop. 9.14. “...*necessarius magis... quam in ullo amabilis imperator.*” All translations in this article are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Watson 53.

the revolt, elements which seem at first glance to be relatively certain, have had doubt cast upon them. In this article, I will examine a number of the problems associated with interpreting the moneyers' rebellion, and attempt to provide the most reasonable answer to each one.

2 | Before delving too deeply into the questions surrounding the moneyers' revolt, it is useful to examine the few literary sources we have for the incident. The most apparently complete account of the revolt is given in the *Historia Augusta*, which claims to reproduce an actual letter from Aurelian to his adoptive father Ulpius Crinitus concerning the uprising.<sup>3</sup> In the letter, he describes the revolt as a "most serious war,"<sup>4</sup> and complains that it goes to show that "nothing is given to me from the immortal gods without a difficult victory."<sup>5</sup> However, reported correspondence is a common literary technique in the later biographies of the *Historia Augusta*, and the vast majority if not all of the letters are bogus. There is no reason at all to ascribe any greater veracity to this one. There are also questions about the date of the *Historia Augusta*. Although many of the biographies purport to have been written for the emperors Diocletian or Constantine,<sup>6</sup> which would put them relatively close to the events of Aurelian's reign, it has also been

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<sup>3</sup> SHA *Aurel.* 38.3-4. The author of the *Vita Aureliani* is named as Flavius Vopiscus Syracusius, who is also credited with the Lives of Tacitus, Probus, "The Four Tyrants," and Carinus. However, given the doubts about the actual authorship of the *Historia Augusta*, I will refer to the work by title rather than by author.

<sup>4</sup> SHA *Aurel.* 38.3. "...*sedition intramurana bellum mihi gravissimum peperit.*"

<sup>5</sup> SHA *Aurel.* 38.4. "*Unde apparet nullam mihi dis immortalibus datam sine <dif>ficultate victoriam.*"

<sup>6</sup> E.g., SHA *Maxim.* 1.1. "*Ne fastidiosum esset clementiae tuae, Constantine Maxime...*"

argued forcefully that they are in fact of late 4<sup>th</sup>-century composition, and possibly even by a single author.<sup>7</sup>

Sextus Aurelius Victor, his anonymous epitomist, and Eutropius, all three of whom are known to have written in the mid- to late-4<sup>th</sup> century, and all of whom wrote in Latin, also describe the events of the moneyers' revolt, although in not nearly as much detail as the *Historia Augusta*. There are, oddly enough, striking similarities between Eutropius' account and that included in the *Epitome*. For example, the two sources use exactly the same wording to describe the Aurelian's response to the revolt.<sup>8</sup> This similarity, of course, raises the question of who was borrowing from whom, but it appears likely that it is in fact the *Epitome* that is borrowing from Eutropius, rather than the other way around.<sup>9</sup>

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Finally, there are fleeting remarks concerning the moneyers' revolt in the writings of two 5<sup>th</sup>-century writers: Polemius Silvius and John Malalas. Silvius, who compiled a series of eclectic lists for a bishop named Eucherius, mentions the purported leader of the uprising, while Malalas, a historian from the eastern part of the Empire who is our only Greek source for the moneyers' revolt, makes a rather startling assertion concerning the event's location.<sup>10</sup> Both of these instances will be discussed further on in the article, in the appropriate context.

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<sup>7</sup> This theory was first put forward by Hermann Dessau, in the later years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. More recently, it has been taken by scholars such as Sir Ronald Syme (Syme 1). If true, the theory would make the *Historia Augusta* relatively contemporary with Eutropius, Aurelius Victor and the *Epitome*, and perhaps even suggest a common source.

<sup>8</sup> Eutrop 9.14.1, *Epit.* 35.4. In both cases, the text reads “*quos Aurelianus victos ultima crudelitate compescuit.*”

<sup>9</sup> Gatti 95 et al.

<sup>10</sup> Pol. Silv. 1.49, Malalas 12.30

## The Prelude

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Lucius Domitius Aurelianus took the throne in A.D. 270 at roughly the age of fifty-five, following the short reign of Claudius II Gothicus and the subsequent and even briefer reign of Quintillus. At the time, the state of the Roman monetary system, like much of the imperial government, was abysmal. The denomination known as the *antoninianus*, which had replaced the *denarius* as the lynchpin of the Roman silver coinage under the emperor Caracalla a half-century earlier, had become a debased mockery of its former self. Under Caracalla, the *antoniniani* had been composed of 50% silver, but by the time of Aurelian the silver content had dropped to less than 5%, and in some cases less than 3%.<sup>11</sup> The main culprit in this debasement had been the repeated need to make large payments to the Roman armies, which had been fighting a nearly unending series of both civil and foreign wars. The continuous debasement of the *antoninianus* had not been matched by a similar process involving the standard gold coin, the *aureus*, meaning that the *antoninianus*, originally probably pegged at roughly 1/25 of an *aureus*, was now worth, in reality, approximately 1/600 of the *aureus*.<sup>12</sup> The *denarius* itself had almost completely ceased to be struck, as had the lesser bronze denominations, since inflation had rendered them practically worthless<sup>13</sup>. The coinage had even suffered on the artistic front; Webb describes the portraiture on Aurelian's early coins as "so ugly as to be almost grotesque."<sup>14</sup> This, then, was the situation into which Aurelian was

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<sup>11</sup> Homo 156 n3, Watson 126, et al.

<sup>12</sup> Carson 230.

<sup>13</sup> Harl 134.

<sup>14</sup> Webb 248.

thrust, and his task of reforming it was not made any easier by the fact that the monetary system was also beset by serious criminal activity.

### The Fraud

Aurelius Victor, in his brief account of the mint-workers' revolt, says that they "made war out of fear of punishment,"<sup>15</sup> and it seems clear that there was, in fact, large-scale fraud going on at the Rome mint. However, what exact form this fraud took is a matter of some speculation. The most commonly-discussed form of monetary fraud is over-debasement of the coinage, wherein the already meager silver content of the coins is further lessened by "watering it down" with lead and other base metals, while the workers pocket the left-over silver. Indeed, there is evidence for this form of fraud at the Rome mint; comparative analysis of coins from that mint and others show quite clearly that coins struck in Rome had noticeably less silver content than those struck elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> The fraud is actually detectable from the reign of Claudius Gothicus; Léon Homo, in his seminal 1904 book on the reign of Aurelian, produced a table showing that Roman silver coins at that time contained only, on average, about 54% of the silver of those from the mints of Tarraco, Siscia, and Antioch.<sup>17</sup> As noted above, lead was the most common metal used to replace the silver, but there are also

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<sup>15</sup> Victor *Caes.* 35.6. "...poenae metu bellum fecerant..."

<sup>16</sup> Homo 158-9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 159. According to this table, it is possible that similar malfeasance was going on at the mint of Cyzicus, as well as at Rome.

suspiciously large amounts of zinc and tin in the *antoniniani* from the mint at Rome, and even traces of iron.<sup>18</sup>

6 | A second form of fraud is also possible, however. The practice of “clipping” or “shaving” coins, wherein the mint-workers would have cut very small amounts of metal from the edges of the coins, is also known to have occurred in this era. Turcan, in particular, has argued that this was the main crime being committed at the Rome mint.<sup>19</sup> The argument here revolves around the exact terms being used in the ancient sources to describe the “violation” of the coinage. Both Aurelius Victor and Eutropius refer to the fraud, using different terms.<sup>20</sup> Of the two, Aurelius Victor is the more precise (as will be discussed elsewhere, this sentence from Eutropius is somewhat vague), and his use of the verb *corrodere* is likely significant. *Corrodere* has a sense of “to gnaw,” *nummariam notam* seems to denote struck coinage as opposed to the raw flans, and from these facts Turcan argues fairly convincingly that the mint-workers were shaving metal from the edges of the coins.<sup>21</sup> Strangely, Turcan does seem to get himself slightly confused over the particular denomination upon which this practice was being carried out. He notes that the adjective *nummarius* is usually relevant to the bronze coinage, but the fact that there was no bronze coinage struck at Rome at that time means that Aurelius Victor can only have been referring to the *antoniniani*.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 158-9.

<sup>19</sup> Turcan 957.

<sup>20</sup> Victor *Caes.* 35.6 “...*nummariam notam corosissent.*”; Eutrop. 14.1 “...*vitiates pecuniis...*”.

<sup>21</sup> Turcan 952-4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 957-8.

In the end, the balance of evidence both from the written sources and from the coins themselves would seem to indicate that in fact both these types of fraud were taking place, and on a fairly significant scale.<sup>23</sup> R.E.A. Palmer seems to imply the possibility that the mint-workers were not, in fact, committing fraud, and that the accusation was merely a pretext for Aurelian to crack down on the restless populace of Rome, but the evidence says otherwise.<sup>24</sup> There is ample proof of various types of fraud going on in the mint at Rome, and the mint-workers apparently had good reason to fear imminent imperial punishment.

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### **The Site of the Revolt**

The revolt of the moneyers almost certainly took place at Rome, and Aurelius Victor even locates its outbreak specifically on the Caelian Hill.<sup>25</sup> However, there is a dissenting opinion; the very late Greek historian John of Antioch, more usually known as John Malalas, places the uprising in Antioch, in the wake of the taking of that city from the forces of Zenobia by Aurelian in 272.<sup>26</sup> This theory has been defended against the other sources by Michael Peachin, who states that “[w]e ought not to disbelieve Malalas cavalierly.”<sup>27</sup> However, much of Peachin’s argument is based on the plausibility of a revolt at Antioch, rather than any concrete evidence in favour of one. While it is worth noting that, of the

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 954.

<sup>24</sup> Palmer 219.

<sup>25</sup> Victor *Caes.* 35.6. “...*per Coelium montem congressi...*”

<sup>26</sup> Malalas 12.30. Note that Malalas himself was an Antiochene, which probably explains why he gave greater emphasis than might be expected to certain events in that city.

<sup>27</sup> Peachin 335.

8 | sources for the moneyers' revolt, only Polemius Silvius and the *Epitome* explicitly name Rome as the site,<sup>28</sup> Aurelius Victor and Eutropius refer to the revolt taking place "within the city," and in context "the city" can only refer to Rome, even if we ignore Aurelius Victor's specific locating of the event on the Caelian Hill.<sup>29</sup> The *Historia Augusta* states that the revolt took place "within the walls," and again this almost certainly indicates Rome.<sup>30</sup> Peachin does attempt to deal with these sources, but his theory is merely that the specific mention of Rome in the *Epitome* is the author's own addition to material taken from an earlier source, and he completely fails to mention Polemius Silvius at all.<sup>31</sup> The most likely possibility is that Malalas referred to a completely different incident. He makes no reference to widespread violence, noting only that Aurelian was angry with, and subsequently punished, the mint workers.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the reason given for the revolt is different; Malalas claimed that the mint workers, who after all had recently been striking coins for Aurelian's enemies, demanded a return of their previous rights and status, without any mention of fraud.<sup>33</sup> Peachin admits the possibility of two incidents, but does seem to want to have Malalas describe the main uprising, with those sources locating the event at Rome being in error.<sup>34</sup> However, it seems to me most likely that there were in fact two incidents, the extraordinarily violent one at Rome, and a more minor bit of rebellious behaviour at Antioch.

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<sup>28</sup> Pol. Silv. 1.49; *Epit.* 35.4 "in urbe Roma"

<sup>29</sup> Victor *Caes.* 35.6 "intra urbem"; Eutrop. 14.1 "in urbe".

<sup>30</sup> SHA *Aurel.* 38.3 "seditio intramurana".

<sup>31</sup> Peachin 333.

<sup>32</sup> Malalas 12.30.

<sup>33</sup> Malalas 12.30.

<sup>34</sup> Peachin 335.



## The Date of the Revolt

Two dates have been put forward for the uprising of the mint workers. The latter of these is A.D. 274, when Aurelian is believed to have put his major monetary reform into effect once he had defeated the usurper Tetricus.<sup>35</sup> This date was the accepted one until early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when it was refuted by Homo, although as late as the 1960s adherents to it could still be found.<sup>36</sup> The thinking behind this hypothesis is that the mint workers were upset over the reforms, and rioted to show their displeasure. Eutropius' account of the *Bellum Monetarium* lends some credence to the idea that the incident occurred in 274, since it follows directly after the author's description of the fallout from the war against Tetricus.<sup>37</sup> However, this theory is unacceptable on a number of levels. First, and most importantly, the mint at Rome had actually been closed for roughly three years prior to Aurelian's reforms, and even if it had re-opened by this point, it was likely operating at less than half its normal capacity. Secondly, by 274 the Senate seems to have been cooperating with Aurelian, thus depriving the mint-workers of a potential source of support.<sup>38</sup>

Far more probable, and indeed more accepted, is the theory that the revolt took place much earlier in the reign of Aurelian, in A.D. 271, and probably during the early part of the year.<sup>39</sup> This date

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<sup>35</sup> Carson 233.

<sup>36</sup> Turcan 948.

<sup>37</sup> Eutrop. 13.2.

<sup>38</sup> The relationship between Aurelian and the Senate is a difficult issue, and one too large to explore fully here. I will say only that in my opinion, the relationship was not as fractious as has been thought, despite the executions early in Aurelian's reign.

<sup>39</sup> Watson 127.

fits nicely with a number of other attested incidents of civil disorder and treason. Furthermore, the emperor was actually away from Rome at that time, fighting in northern Italy, and, as Homo notes, this absence and the fact that Aurelian had recently been defeated in battle gave ample opportunity for mischief on the part of the moneyers.<sup>40</sup> Finally, it makes much more sense to have the revolt occur just before or at the very beginning of the Rome mint's closure, rather than at its end.

### The Participants

The only actual name which we have associated with the revolt of the moneyers is that of Felicissimus, who apparently was a *rationalis*, or accountant, at the mint of Rome.<sup>41</sup> Although his exact title is not given in any of the sources, it is probable that he was the *Procurator Summarum Rationum*, the top official in the monetary system at the time; in the *Historia Augusta's* spurious letter to Ulpian, Aurelian is made to describe Felicissimus as the man "to whom I had given the procuratorship of the fisc."<sup>42</sup> This position was reserved for men of equestrian rank, so the remark in the *Historia Augusta* describing Felicissimus as the "lowest of slaves" must not be taken literally.<sup>43</sup> About Felicissimus himself, we know very little. There is an inscription from Trebula Mutuesca, in Latium about sixty kilometres north of Rome, which mentions a certain Aurelius Felicissimus, a procurator, who was alive during

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<sup>40</sup> Homo 163-4 n.3.

<sup>41</sup> Both Aurelius Victor (*Caes.*35.6) and Eutropius (14.1) describe Felicissimus as a *rationalis*. He is not mentioned at all in the *Epitome*.

<sup>42</sup> SHA Aurel. 38.3. "...cui procurationem fisci mandaveram..."

<sup>43</sup> SHA Aurel. 38.3 "...Felicissimo, ultimo servorum..."

the consulships of Arrianus and Papius.<sup>44</sup> These two were in office, according to the consular *Fasti*, in A.D. 243,<sup>45</sup> which makes it not impossible that the man mentioned in the inscription was the same *rationalis* who was in charge of the mint at Rome. Alaric Watson has even noted that there are reasons to identify the two as the same man; unhelpfully, he does not actually give any of those reasons.<sup>46</sup>

Felicissimus' role in the revolt is a matter of some speculation. He is named by Aurelius Victor and the *Historia Augusta* as the *auctore* of the disorder,<sup>47</sup> and it is not unreasonable to suppose that he was one of the ringleaders of the fraud at the mint, especially given that he was the highest-ranking bureaucrat involved with minting coins. The late 5<sup>th</sup>-century Roman list-maker Polemius Silvius even goes so far as to name Felicissimus among the attempted usurpers during the reign of Aurelian, alongside Tetricus and others.<sup>48</sup> However, any suggestion that Felicissimus was attempting to place himself on the throne can safely be deemed an exaggeration; such a move would have been an extraordinarily ambitious one for an equestrian bureaucrat, and it seems clear that Silvius simply mis-interpreted Felicissimus' role as *auctore* of the revolt. Eutropius is the only one of our ancient sources who does not specifically name Felicissimus the leader of the revolt, as he uses a rather vague ablative absolute to describe the beginnings of the rebellion,<sup>49</sup> one which might imply that the mint-workers murdered Felicissimus,<sup>50</sup> or that his execution was one of the

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<sup>44</sup> C.I.L. IX.4894.

<sup>45</sup> Clinton 258.

<sup>46</sup> Watson 236 n.55.

<sup>47</sup> Victor *Caes.* 35.6; SHA *Aurel.* 38.3.

<sup>48</sup> Pol. Silv. 1.49. "*Sub quo Victorinus... Romae Felicissimus... tyranni fuerunt.*"

<sup>49</sup> Eutrop. 14.1. "*...monetarii rebellaverunt... Felicissimo rationali interfecto.*"

<sup>50</sup> Turcan 949.

triggers of the uprising. Whatever the case, it is clear from the ancient sources that Felicissimus was killed early on during the uprising, whether by the soldiers attempting to suppress it or as a placatory move by the mint-workers themselves.

12 | Who, precisely, took part in the rioting is also a matter of some dispute. We can safely assume, given all the sources, that the mint-workers themselves were involved; however, given that there were probably only at most a couple of hundred of these in Rome at the time,<sup>51</sup> it is impossible that they alone could be responsible for the number of casualties mentioned in the sources (see below). This remains true even if we take into account the fact that the mint-workers were a well-organized and fairly powerful guild.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, we must ask who else participated in the uprising, and two reasonable possibilities present themselves. First of all, we know that Aurelian had to suppress at least one major episode of treason involving Roman senators, and it is not unreasonable to postulate a connection between this problem and the uprising at the mint. Michael Peachin argues against senatorial participation, discounting it as “frankly difficult to imagine,” but gives no reason for this viewpoint.<sup>53</sup> I would argue for the exact opposite viewpoint, that it is difficult to imagine that senators opposed to Aurelian were *not* involved. Homo supports this position, noting that the mint-workers were “without doubt” supported by some of the senators.<sup>54</sup> Aurelian’s relationship with the Senate was not terribly good at this point in his reign,<sup>55</sup> and in fact one of the rights which

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<sup>51</sup> Peachin 335, n.43.

<sup>52</sup> Homo 162-3.

<sup>53</sup> Peachin 335, n. 43.

<sup>54</sup> Homo 163-4 n.3.

<sup>55</sup> Gatti 98, but see n. 38 above.

the emperor stripped from the Senate was the privilege of minting bronze coinage.<sup>56</sup> Of course, this had been a fairly token privilege for some time, given the paucity of bronze coinage in general, but it was nonetheless a reduction in the Senate's prestige.<sup>57</sup> Like the closure of the mint at Rome, there is some question concerning when the Senate lost the bronze coinage; there may be reason to believe that this happened as early as the reign of Claudius Gothicus, or alternatively that it occurred after the moneyers' uprising, as a form of punishment.<sup>58</sup> However, whether the Senate lost this right before or after the uprising is irrelevant to the question of senatorial participation; if it was done beforehand, it gives a powerful motive for senatorial discontent, and if afterwards, it is evidence that Aurelian was punishing the Senate for something related to the monetary system. Unfortunately, none of our sources specifically and clearly correlate the two events; Eutropius' remark that "[Aurelian] condemned very many nobles to death" could be taken as a description of the aftermath of the moneyers' revolt, but this is by no means certain.<sup>59</sup>

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The other possibility concerning participation in the moneyers' revolt is that a large sector of the population of Rome joined in the unrest. R.E.A. Palmer has argued very strongly in favour of this notion, stating bluntly that "Aurelian's war against moneyers... was a general riot."<sup>60</sup> This is a reasonable and indeed probable suggestion, as it takes into account the fact the general economic situation at Rome was tenuous at the time, with probable

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<sup>56</sup> Turcan 948, et al.

<sup>57</sup> Turcan 948.

<sup>58</sup> Gatti 97-81; Homo 169-70.

<sup>59</sup> Eutrop. 14.1 "*Plurimos nobiles capite damnavit.*"

<sup>60</sup> Palmer 220.

shortages of food and other necessities, and as a result there were numerous reasons for discontent in the Roman populace.<sup>61</sup> An added incentive for civil disorder would have the menacing propinquity of the Germanic Iuthungi, who had penetrated the Empire as far as central Italy.

14 | Finally, some mention must be made of the casualty figures mentioned by the sources. Both the *Historia Augusta* and Aurelius Victor mention the figure of 7,000 dead,<sup>62</sup> and the *Historia Augusta* specifically states that this was merely the number of soldiers killed, leaving aside casualties among the rioters (the *Historia Augusta* goes so far as to list the different types of soldiers killed: "...marines and river-bank guards and camp-soldiers and Dacians"<sup>63</sup>). However, this casualty list is included in one of the completely fictional letters which are a common feature of this particular section of the *Historia Augusta*, and W.H. Fisher was probably completely correct in describing the passage as having no historical value whatsoever.<sup>64</sup> Aurelius Victor, on the other hand describes the 7,000 dead as coming from among the *bellatores*,<sup>65</sup> which can be taken in the more general sense of "fighters" or "combatants," and thus could mean both soldiers and rioters.<sup>66</sup> Palmer takes the exact opposite view to the *Historia Augusta*, and claims that 7,000 represents the number of rioters killed, leaving the soldiers out of the equation entirely.<sup>67</sup> Perhaps the most

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> SHA Aurel. 38.2. "...septem tamen mil[it]ibus suorum militum interemptis..." Victor Caes. 35.6. "...septem fere bellatorum milia confecerint."

<sup>63</sup> SHA Aurel. 38.4 ".....septem mil[it]ibus Lembariorum et Riparensium et Castrianorum et Daciscorum interemptis."

<sup>64</sup> Fisher 144.

<sup>65</sup> Victor Caes. 35.6

<sup>66</sup> Fisher 132.

<sup>67</sup> Palmer 219.

reasonable suggestion here is that, as Aurelius Victor seems to imply, the figure represents the total number of casualties on both sides.

### **The Aftermath.**

It is widely accepted that Aurelian closed the mint at Rome in the aftermath of the revolt. However, this may be both an overstatement and a misinterpretation of the chain of events. Homo puts forward the idea that the closure of the mint was not done in the wake of the revolt, but was actually the event that triggered it.<sup>68</sup> There could well be some validity to this opinion; closure of the mint would not only have been a reasonable response to the discovery of fraud, but would have given the mint-workers fear of unemployment as an added motive for violence.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, coins were struck at the Rome mint between A.D. 271 and the return of the facility to full production in A.D. 274. There is evidence that 5 *officinae* were in operation at some point during this period, probably towards the end.<sup>70</sup> Turcan does seem to think that the 5 *officinae* operated for a brief period immediately after the rebellion, but he gives no evidence for this view, and it seems more likely that the mint was closed completely in the wake of the violence, and then partially re-opened much later.<sup>71</sup> This limited activity may represent nothing more than an attempt to get the mint operational before Aurelian's major

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<sup>68</sup> Homo 163.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 162, n.1, opposed by Gatti 96.

<sup>70</sup> Webb 256.

<sup>71</sup> Turcan 948.

reforms came into effect, which would have presumably involved training new workers and testing new equipment.

16 | Furthermore, the exact reason for the mint's closure is not as clear as might seem. The generally accepted view, that the mint was closed in the wake of the rebellion, leaves one to wonder whether this was done as a simple punishment of the mint-workers themselves, whether the rebellion had reduced the ranks of trained mint-workers to the point where keeping the operation running was no longer feasible, or whether the mint itself had been damaged or destroyed during the rioting. All three of these notions are reasonable, but it seems to me that the first one carries the most merit. For one thing, closure of the mint as a punitive action also fits with the theory that this event actually preceded the revolt; in this case, the closure would have been in reaction to the on-going fraud, whereas if we take the closure as a post-revolt event, then it was done as punishment for the violence itself. The second hypothesis, that the guild of mint-workers had been completely wiped out, is unlikely, especially since there is evidence that Aurelian actually pardoned some of the rebellious mint-workers and took them eastward with him later on, as soldiers in his campaigns in the Balkans.<sup>72</sup> The third possibility, that of the destruction of the mint itself, is entirely possible on its own merits but is not supported by any evidence whatsoever.<sup>73</sup>

The Rome mint did re-open under Aurelian, probably in late 274.<sup>74</sup> It did so in conjunction with a number of currency reforms initiated by the emperor, reforms which foreshadowed the far more dramatic and successful efforts of Diocletian some 15

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<sup>72</sup> Watson 133.

<sup>73</sup> Homo 164.

<sup>74</sup> Webb 256.



years later. Aurelian re-set the silver content of the *antoninianus* to 5%, and added the somewhat enigmatic XXI mark to that denomination.<sup>75</sup> He also revived the *denarius*, and began striking bronze *sestertii* and *asses* again, although there remains doubt about exactly what these coins were worth<sup>76</sup>. There is no evidence that he returned the bronze coinage to the Senate, although the tell-tale letters S.C. would later begin to appear again on coins of Florian, one of Aurelian's short-lived successors.<sup>77</sup> However, this would prove to be an exception to the general course of events; from the time of Aurelian on, the bronze coinage and the mints in general were the responsibility of the emperor.<sup>78</sup> Aurelian had, of course, undertaken a minor reform in A.D. 271, and Watson argues that this was because “[t]he revolt of the mint workers and the full-scale riots to which it gave rise... deeply affected Aurelian.”<sup>79</sup> However, one should hesitate to think that the moneyers' revolt was the impetus for these reforms; it is just as likely, in my opinion, that it was the other around, if indeed there was any relationship between

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<sup>75</sup> There has been much debate over what the XXI (or its Greek form, KA) indicates. For the purposes of this article, suffice it to say that it almost certainly represents the fraction 1/20. The presence of this fraction likely means one of three things: that the new *antoniniani* were worth 20 of a smaller denomination (such as the *as*, which Aurelian brought back into production at this time), that 20 *antoniniani* were worth 1 of a larger denomination (unlikely), or that the silver content of the new coins was 1/20. Finally, Harl (146) and others have argued that these coins actually represent a completely new denomination, called the *aurelianus*. The main point, however, is that they represented a vast improvement on what had been there before.

<sup>76</sup> Webb 249-50.

<sup>77</sup> S.C. does appear on one post-reform *sestertius* of Aurelian (R.I.C. 75), a CONCORD.MILIT type from the mint at Rome, but it is in a very strange spot on the reverse of the coin, and in my opinion probably represents a mint mark rather than an assertion of senatorial authority.

<sup>78</sup> Homo 171-2.

<sup>79</sup> Watson 127.

the two events at all. Once again, our lack of certain knowledge of the relative chronology of events prevents us from making a definitive judgement.

18| Aurelian also re-organized the bureaucratic structure of the monetary system, abolishing the position held by the late Felicissimus. In its place, he created an office known as the *agens vice rationalis*, and apparently appointed one Gaius Valarius Sabinus to fill it.<sup>80</sup> This piece of reorganization may be related to the concentrating of authority over the mints in the hands of the emperor, as in addition to abolishing Felicissimus' old position, it also meant the end of the senatorial *tresviri monetales*.<sup>81</sup>

If we take together all the sources and evidence concerning the mint workers' revolt, the following picture emerges. Prior to A.D. 271, large-scale fraud, probably involving both skimming silver and clipping coins, was being committed at the mint of Rome, exacerbating the already dismal state of the Roman coinage. Out of probably-justified fear of retribution, during a time of considerable public anxiety at Rome, the mint-workers rebelled under the leadership of the *Procurator Summarum Rationum*, Felicissimus. They were joined in this sedition by members of the Roman general public, and almost certainly by a number of senators who were opposed to Aurelian and resented the loss of their traditional prerogatives. Serious violence ensued, and Felicissimus, along with hundreds of others, was killed. Either immediately before or immediately after the revolt, the mint at Rome was closed, the Senate lost its right to strike bronze coins, and Aurelian put in place a series of modest reforms to the coinage itself and to the

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<sup>80</sup> Watson 127-8.

<sup>81</sup> Homo 170.

system under which it was produced. Approximately three years later, in late A.D. 273 or 274, the mint re-opened at reduced capacity, and then returned to full operation after the institution of Aurelian's major reforms.

In conclusion, it is still difficult to define how much historical importance can be given to the revolt of the mint-workers. The question hinges upon the chronological relationship between the uprising, the closure of the Rome mint, and Aurelian's first series of monetary reforms. If the revolt preceded the other two events, then it was quite clearly a very significant event, and could possibly even be interpreted as a turning point in the history of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D, for the reforms of Aurelian were a direct prelude to the more famous efforts of Diocletian. If, on the other hand, the revolt of the mint-workers was a response to those two occurrences, then its significance lies primarily in the startling level of violence that accompanied it, and the possible participation of members of the senatorial class. However, if nothing else, the fact that the mint-workers rioted at Rome in early A.D. 271 can at least be seen as a symptom of how sorry a state the entire Roman monetary system was in through the middle part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.

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