

Clare ROWAN

Mythical Memory, the 'Commemorative' Medallions
of Antoninus Pius and the Temple of Venus and Rome

The 'Commemorative' medallions of Antoninus Pius narrate Rome's mythical foundations, providing a visual account of the early history of the city. Scenes on these medallions include imagery associated with the myth of Aeneas, the rape of the Sabine women, the introduction of Aesculapius to Rome, and the legends of Attus Navius and Horatius Cocles, amongst others. The coin types of Antoninus Pius from AD 140-144 also allude to the very beginnings of Rome, showing the rape of Rhea Silvia, the pregnant sow, and the myth of Aeneas.

Most modern scholarship has followed Toynbee (*CR* 1925:170-173) in interpreting these pieces as part of an imperial programme anticipating the 900th birthday of Rome in AD 147. But the medallions date to AD 140-144, three years before the celebration, and many of them continue Hadrianic types, at times even using Hadrianic dies. Given these problems, this paper proposes that Antoninus Pius' 'commemorative' medallions and many of his coin types from AD 140-144 should be linked to the construction of the temple of Venus and Rome. The temple was begun by Hadrian and completed by Pius in c. AD 140/1. A temple to Rome in Rome provoked a reconsideration of the city's early history; the legends and images chosen for these medallions reflect the conceptualization of Rome's beginnings in the second century. The juxtaposition of types recalling legendary events with types displaying deities reflects the belief in a divine role in Rome's founding, and the continuing contextualization of Roman origins inside of a 'Greek' framework. Images that defy modern identification suggest that this vision of Rome's history may have deviated from the literary sources that survive today.

The medallions (and the associated sculptural images that must have decorated the temple) would also influence the memory of Roman history and the identity of Rome itself. Scenes from these medallions would reappear again and again, as late as Constantius II. This phenomenon not only illustrates that coin types could enter a wider communal memory, but suggests that the essence of Rome and its foundations came to be associated with the myths and legends displayed on Pius' medallions.