

Between goddess and empress: iconographic ambiguity in a provincial Roman bronze

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Introduction

When the Ackland Art Museum acquired its *Statuette of Juno* (87.4) in April 1987, the museum knew of the small figurine’s significance and value to both its Ancient Mediterranean collection and Roman art history.

Believed to originate from modern-day France, the statuette depicts the Roman deity Juno, goddess of marriage. It likely once sat in a *lararium* (household shrine) in a Roman house, serving as the focal point of offerings for a Roman family.

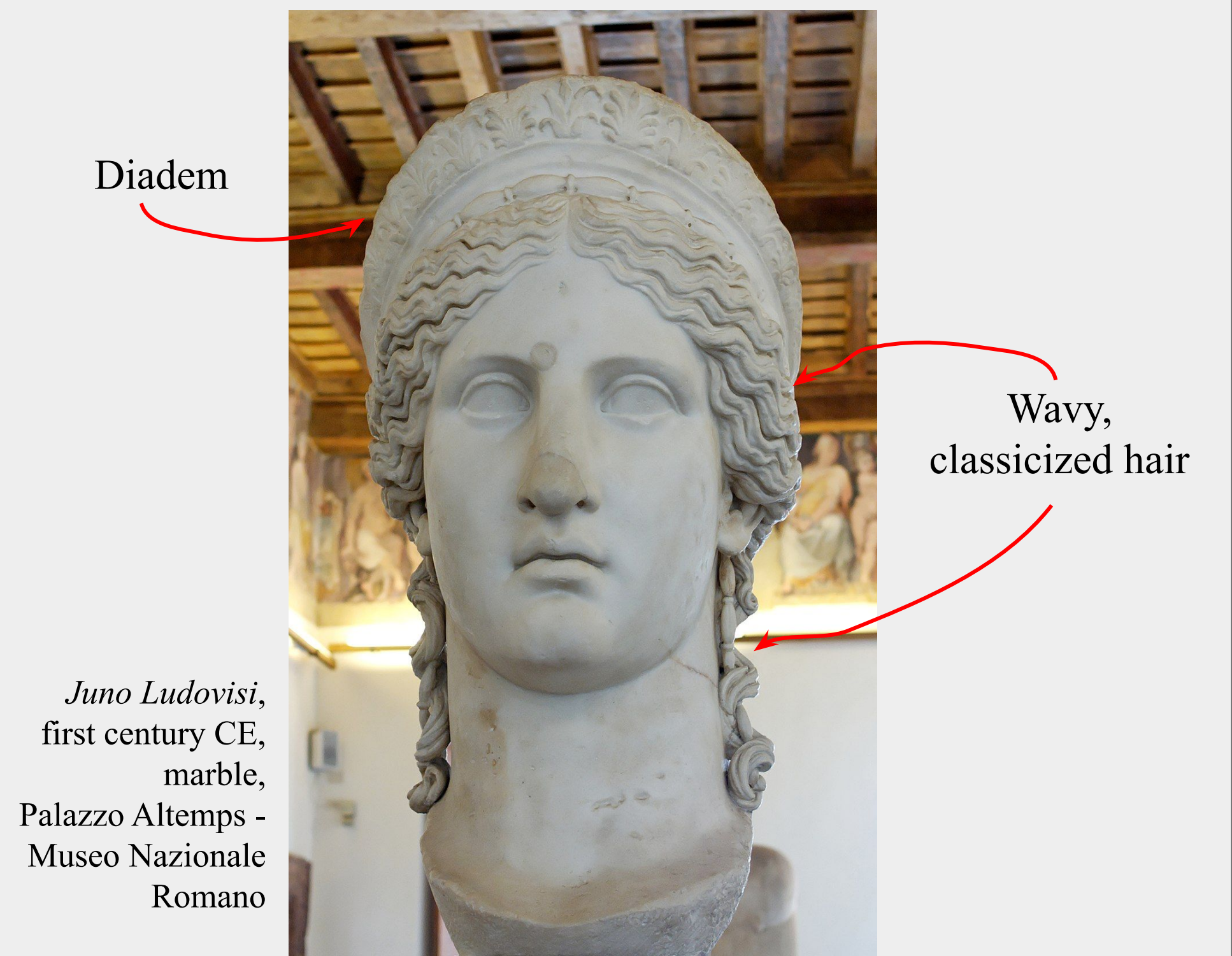
While the Ackland has amassed a number of interpretations beyond merely a *lararium* statuette for its Juno, this project aims to place the Ackland Juno within its iconographic and geographic contexts in the second and third centuries CE by examining its relation to portraits of Antonine-era (96-192 CE) empresses. All this is to ask the question: does the Ackland Juno depict the goddess, or someone else?

Methodology

This project examines the Ackland Juno through an **iconographic lens**, drawing primarily from coin imagery of the goddess Juno and Roman empresses from the Antonine Period onwards (96-192 CE).

It was very common for Roman empresses to liken themselves to goddesses through shared iconography and imagery, as it suggested powerful propagandic allusions to their virtue and piety. As the model mythological wife, Juno was a common figure for empresses and political figures to associate themselves with, showcasing their willingness to serve their male family figures (the emperor) and reflect traditional Roman values of virtue.

Below is a first century CE sculpture of Antonia Minor (36 BCE - 37 CE), the niece of Augustus (r. 27 BCE - 14 CE) and sister-in-law to Tiberius (r. 14-37 CE) in the guise of Juno.



Results

The stance and attributes of the Ackland Juno appears in a number of variations throughout the Roman world in the imperial period. Most significantly, multiple empresses from the Antonine Period had coins issued by their husbands with their likeness on the obverse (head) and Juno on the reverse (tails). Juno was often depicted as either seated or standing (like the Ackland Juno), holding a *patera* (offering bowl) and a scepter, and was accompanied by an inscription of IVNONI REGINAE (“Juno the queen”) or simply IVNO (“Juno”).

Of the Antonine empresses with coinage issued likening them to Juno, the mother-daughter pair of Faustina the Elder (100-140 CE) and Faustina the Younger (130-175/176 CE) bear the most similarities in appearance to the Ackland Juno when the statuette is compared to the empresses’ portraits on the obverse of the coin.



Statuette of Juno, mid-second century CE, bronze, 6.25 in. (15.9 cm), Ackland Art Museum (87.4), Chapel Hill, North Carolina



RIC III Antoninus Pius 345, 141 CE, British Museum, R. 13149

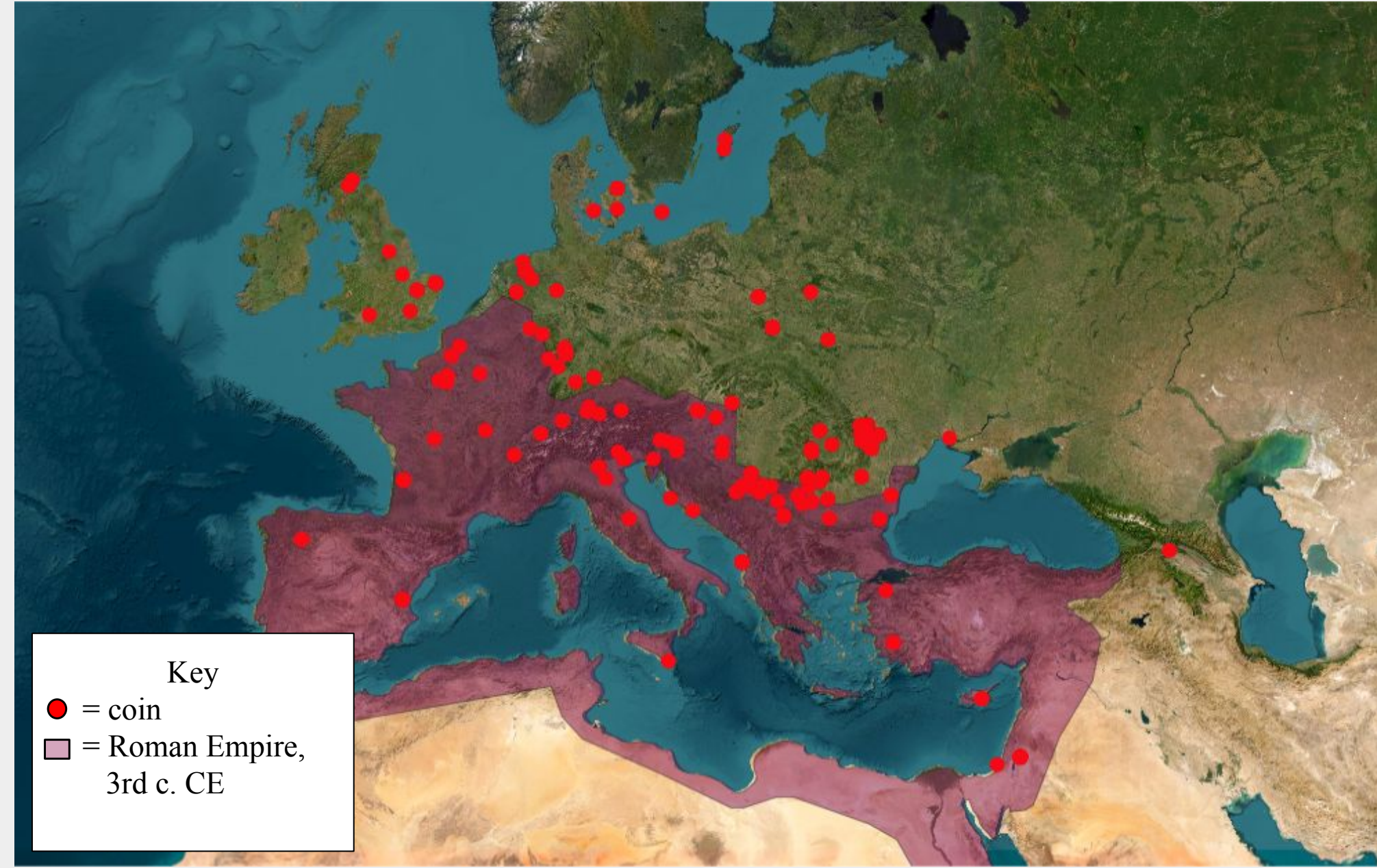
Faustina the Elder (r. 138-140 CE) was depicted as a *diva* (deified individual) following her death in 140 CE, and often connected to Juno through coins. Her veiled portrait and wavy coiffure resemble the Ackland Juno. Additionally, many of her coins depict a standing Juno, much like the Ackland’s statuette.



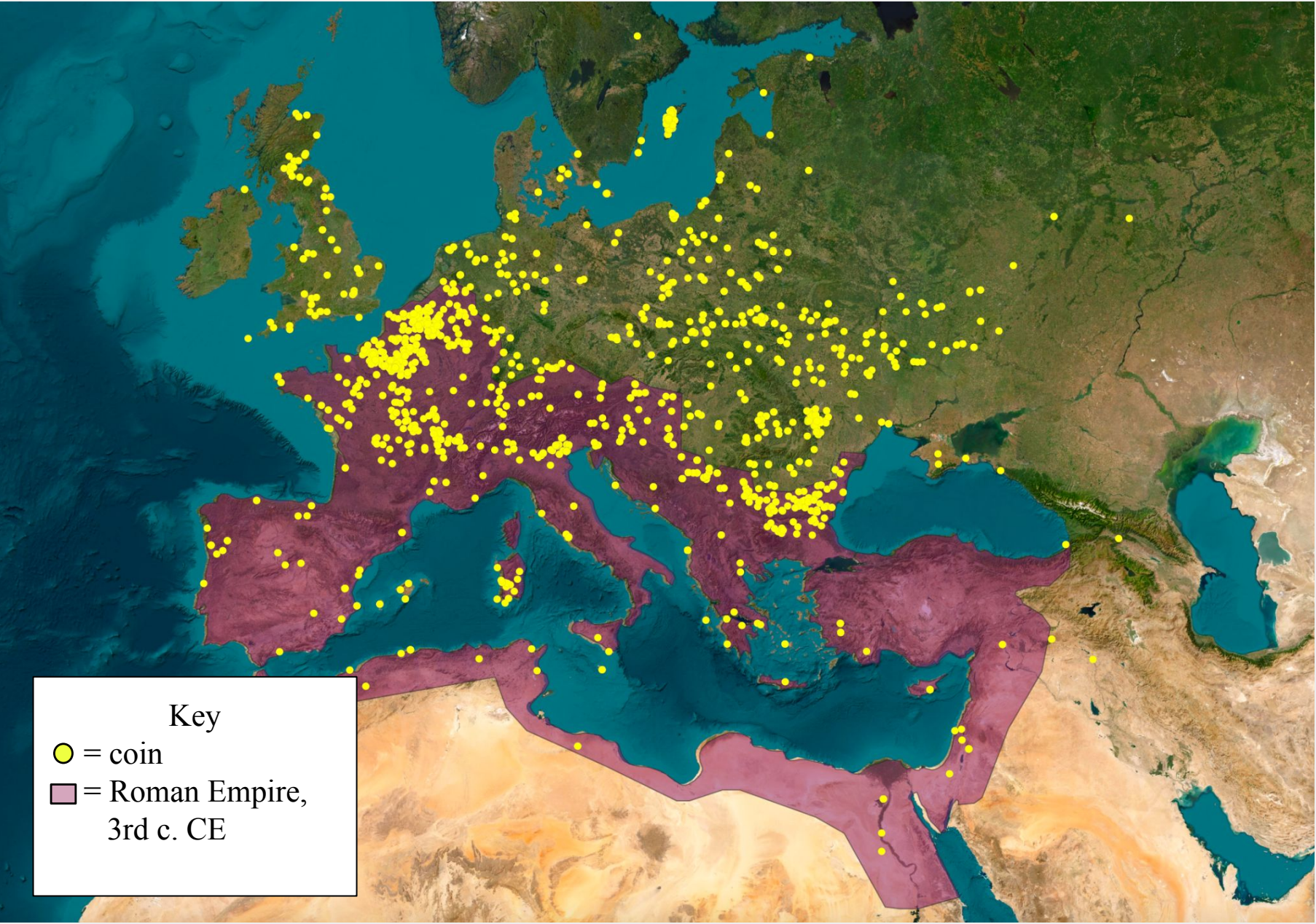
RIC III Marcus Aurelius 698, 161-176 CE, British Museum, R. 14003

The portraits of Faustina the Younger (r. 161-175/176 CE) often showed the empress with a diadem and low bun, likening her to the Ackland Juno. Similarly, the coin seen above has a distinctive and clearly intentional three-curved wave in her coiffure, which matches the Ackland Juno.

The maps below show the dissemination of Juno imagery associated with the coins of Faustina the Elder (left) and Younger (right) throughout the Roman empire, showing the wide reach the iconography had during the second century CE.



Map of Faustina the Elder coins from hoards with a standing Juno obverse, 138-141 CE
Data: Coin Hoards of the Roman Empire, Univ. of Oxford (downloaded December 2024)
Map credit: self



Map of Faustina the Younger coins from hoards with a standing Juno obverse, 161-176 CE

Conclusions

Despite the difficulties associated with iconographic analysis in ancient material, the Ackland Juno bears enough visual similarities to coinage issued with Faustina the Elder and Younger’s likenesses to suggest a connection between the empress(es) and the statuette.

Coin hoard data indicates that the iconography of the standing/seated Juno with a *patera* and scepter was widely circulated through the second century CE Roman Empire, especially in the northern and western provinces where the Ackland Juno allegedly originates from. Likewise, a very similar statuette was found a treasure hoard in Weißenburg-in-Bayern (southern Germany) in 1979 (see below), suggesting that the standing statuette imagery was present in that area as well. The Weißenburg Juno was buried between 233 and 250 CE based on other evidence (i.e., coins) found in the hoard, proving the iconographic Juno image was in the northern provinces by at least that date. Should the Ackland Juno be a portrait image of Faustina the Elder, Faustina the Younger, or another empress, it would be representative of the dissemination of imperial iconography into the households and lives of ordinary Romans, including those in the northwest provinces.



Additional Literature

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