WHEN I was doing the research for the series of articles on the coins of Ephesus I noticed an unusual coin of Ephesus for sale on the Internet and I bought it. (Figure 1) It turned out to be an amazing and important coin and I shall explain why.

The coin is very rare but I found two more examples on the Internet. (Figures 2 and 3) On the obverse a man sits on a curule chair, which is a fold-up chair used by Roman generals on campaign and occasionally by Roman officials. The man wears a toga and has a laurel wreath on his head, and in his right hand he holds a lituus, which is a staff with a curved end. There is a dotted border but no legend on the obverse. On the coin in Figure 2 the lituus is very faint and in the dealer’s description the man is said to be holding a scroll. On this coin the curule chair has a back and is from different dies.

On the reverse there is the Greek word ἘΦΕΣΙΩΝ (Ephesus), which means [a coin] of the Ephesians. It is in a laurel wreath with a circular symbol at the top and a tie at the bottom with the ends sticking up in a V-shape. The Σ in the Greek word is the old form of the letter which was replaced in the latter part of the 1st century AD by C.

The dealer who sold me the coin said it was a coin of the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius (138 – 161 AD). The reference he gave was G. Macdonald, Catalogue of Greek Coins in the Hunterian Collection, University of Glasgow, 3 Volumes, 1899 – 1905, Coin 29 in Volume II (1905), illustrated on Plate L, 17. (Figure 4) The coin is not listed in Cohen, BMC, RIC, RPC, SNG von Aulock, Cop., München, Tubingen, Leypold, Turkey, Hunterian, or in Karwiese.

There is a fairly common coin which shows two men seated on curule chairs. They wear togas and have laurel wreaths on their heads, and one is holding a lituus. On the reverse there are Greek
words in a wreath of laurel and ivy with a circular symbol at the top and a tie at the bottom with the ends sticking up in a V-shape. (Figure 5) It is obvious that this coin and the coin in Figure 1 belong together. They are from the same time and place.

On the obverse of the coin with two men the Greek legend is ΔΡΟΥΣΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΓΕΡΜΑΝΙΚΟΣ ΚΑΙΣΑΡΕΣ ΝΕΟΙ ΘΕΟΙ ΦΙΛΑΔΕΛΦΟΙ, which means “Drusus and Germanicus, new divine Caesars, brother-lovers (i.e. brothers who are fond of each other).” Drusus was the biological son of the Roman emperor Tiberius (14 – 37 AD) and Germanicus was the adopted son of Tiberius. Germanicus was a few years older than Drusus and presumably he is the man on the right while Drusus is on the left holding the lituus. The adjectives “new” and “divine” indicate that they are recently deceased. Germanicus died in 19 AD and Drusus in 23 AD, and therefore the coin was probably issued during the period 23 to 26 AD in the reign of Tiberius, as stated on page 489 of RPC I (Roman Provincial Coinage, Volume 1). The man seated on a curule chair on the obverse of my coin must be Tiberius. (Figure 6)

In RPC I the coin with two men is number 2994 and the mint is considered...
to be Sardis (Sardes) mainly because six examples were found there. As my coin has “of the Ephesians” on the reverse the mint for all these coins must be Ephesus. On the reverse of RPC 2994 the Greek legend is ΕΠΙ ΑΡΧΙΕΡΕΩΣ ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ ΚΛΕΩΝΟΣ ΣΑΡΔΙΑΝΟΥ, which means “in the time of High-Priest Alexander Kleonos, a Sardian (i.e. from Sardis).” But the fact that this magistrate came from Sardis does not mean that the coin was minted there. On the reverse the Greek words in the wreath are ΚΟΙΝΟΥ ΑΣΙΑΣ, which means “of the Commonwealth of [the Roman Province of] Asia.” The temple for the Koinon of Asia was in Pergamum but this does not mean that the coin was minted there.

RPC lists a number of bronze coins that were minted at Ephesus during the reign of Tiberius. They are unusual because on the obverse they have just the head of Tiberius wearing a laurel wreath and there is no legend. The coins of Octavian (Augustus) minted at Ephesus also have only his head on the obverse but he does not wear a laurel wreath.

On the reverse of all the coins of Tiberius minted at Ephesus and listed in RPC the name “Alexander” appears with the name of other magistrates, and he is described as ΑΡΧΙΕΡΕΥΣ (high-priest) and ΓΡΑΜΜΑΤΕΥΣ (town-clerk). (Figures 7 and 8) As shown on RPC 2994 he was the high-priest of the Koinon of Asia. He was not the high-priest of the goddess Artemis at Ephesus. As Professor Melville Jones explains in A Dictionary of Ancient Greek Coins Archierus means “a Greek civic dignitary.” It does not have the same religious sense that the word “priest” has today. Alexander would have been the official who presided in the Koinon of Asia. He could have been a Jewish man. Alexander must have been a very important person. Although he was originally from Sardis he was the president of the Koinon of Asia and the chief magistrate at Ephesus. (Figure 9) What is

Figure 8 – The letters on the coin in Figure 7 have been outlined. The Greek word, “of Alexander”, is near the right edge. The other magistrate is Timarkos.

Figure 9 – Ruins of the prytaneion (magistrates’ office building) at Ephesus. Alexander would have had his office here as the town clerk. (Wikimedia Commons: photo by Elelicht)
of particular significance for Christians is that the name “Alexander” appears in the Book of Acts (Acts 19:33). He is introduced without any explanation as if he was well-known to the readers. He could well have been the Alexander named on the coins, and this would support the historical accuracy of the Book of Acts.

On the coins with one man sitting in a curule chair it looks as if he has a short beard, but his head is so small that one cannot be certain about it. It did, however, cause the coin to be attributed to Antoninus Pius who had a short beard. The numismatists at Classical Numismatic Group dated the coin in Figure 2 to the “time of the Antonines” but put a question mark after it. In the original listing of the coin in MacDonald’s catalogue (Figure 4) the man is not identified but described as bearded and holding the tiny figure of Nike (Victory). The lituus is not clearly seen on the coin illustrated in the catalogue. MacDonald dated it to the 1st century BC.

In ancient Rome there was a college of priests and a college of augurs. An augur carried a lituus and used it to predict the future or answer questions by holding it up and observing the flights of birds, etc. Tiberius was the head of the college of augurs as well as the head (high-priest or Pontifex Maximus) of the college of priests. On my coin he is shown in the former capacity. His son, Drusus, would have been a member of the college of augurs.

During the reign of Tiberius Judaea was part of the Roman Empire. The Roman governors of Judaea respected the Jewish law by not showing human images on the coins, and on the coins of Pontius Pilate (26 – 36 AD) the emperor is represented by a lituus (Figure 10) and a simpulum, which is a ladle used by priests to make libations (Figure 11). The latter referred to his being Pontifex Maximus. Similarly Tiberius’ mother, Livia, is represented by ears of grain, which were symbols of the goddess Demeter, with whom Livia was being identified.

The coin with Drusus and Germanicus on the obverse was restruck with a circular countermark that reproduced exactly the legend on the obverse but put a new legend on the reverse. (Figure 12) The new legend, ΓΑΙΩΣ ΑΣΙΝΝΙΟΣ ΠΟΛΛΙΩΝΙ ΑΝΘΥΠΑΤΩ, means “[in the time of] Gaius Asinius Pollio, proconsul.” A proconsul was a Roman who had been a consul but was afterwards sent to govern a province. Why Pollio had the coin restruck in this way is unknown. Perhaps he was jealous of Alexander and wanted to stamp his authority on the province. On the coin the countermark obliterated Alexander’s name but in order not to flatten the obverse legend (and not incur the emperor’s displeasure) the countermark reproduced the previous obverse legend concerning the sons of Tiberius.

The date of the restriking is debatable. Gaius Asinius Pollio was the grandson of a famous Roman of the same name who had been consul in 40 BC. According to the Roman historian, Tacitus, Pollio Junior was consul in 23 AD, but when he was proconsul of Asia is not known for certain. The date is generally assumed to be 37-8 AD and therefore the coin has been dated to the reign of Caligula (37 – 41 AD) as in Sear’s Greek Imperial Coins where it is illustrated on page 33. The authors of RPC, however, have followed B.E. Levy who considered that Pollio was probably proconsul in 28-9 AD, and have tentatively dated the countermarked coin to 28-9 AD. The earlier date seems more likely, but it makes no difference to my argument that the coin in Figure 1 was minted at Ephesus in about 23 to 26 AD. It is amazing that a coin of Tiberius has been discovered almost two thousand years after it was minted.