

STEFAN RITTER

(Munich)

Buildings on Roman coins: Identification problems¹

(20 figures)

I. The diversity of architectural representations on Roman coins

Different approaches to architecture in Roman coin images

Buildings and monuments on Roman coins are one of the most favorite topics in numismatic research. The reason is understandable: coin images are often the only source that gives us an impression of the appearance of largely lost buildings and monuments, so that they are a very attractive historical source not only for numismatists but for archaeologists and historians as well.

For quite a long time the interest in these coin images was motivated by the assumption that the architectural depictions reflect the appearance of their models quite accurately, allowing us to reconstruct buildings and monuments that have not survived the ages.² It was only in the 1990s that a more differentiated approach started to gain ground.³ Inspired by the general “visual” or “iconic turn”, scholars started to ask questions about the role and function of coin images in communication processes. The focus lies more and more on the different contexts – numismatic, historic and art historical ones – in which the coin images were produced and gained visibility, including

¹ This paper is the modified version of the Ilse and Leo Mildenberg Memorial Lecture I held at the Harvard Art Museums on March 23, 2015. I am very grateful to Carmen Arnold-Biucchi for this invitation, and to Henry Heitmann-Gordon for proofreading my text.

² For an appropriate and critical overview of the history of research on architectural representations on Roman coins see Elkins 2015b, pp. 2–7. Nathan Elkins’ comprehensive monograph which examines “every architectural type produced at the Republican and Imperial mints” (Elkins 2015b, p. 12) reflects the current state of numismatic research on the topic very well, and that is the reason why this publication will be cited more often than others in the present article.

³ A late prominent example of a completely unshaken positivistic approach is Philip V. Hill’s widely cited book on “The Monuments of Ancient Rome as Coin Types” of 1989. Up to that time, sceptical voices were only sporadically heard and had no lasting effect; for the relevant publications see Elkins 2015b, p. 1, n. 2; pp. 5–6 with ns. 17, 20, 24. A particularly remarkable case is the neglect of Günter Fuchs’ dissertation on “Architekturdarstellungen auf römischen Münzen der Republik und der frühen Kaiserzeit” which was finished already in 1954 and published, after the author’s sudden death, in 1969. This monograph stands out for its very careful analysis of coin images and convincing arguments but by no means received the attention it deserved among numismatists, especially in the English-speaking world; cf. Elkins 2009, p. 33, n. 30; Elkins 2015b, pp. 4–5 with ns. 16, 17.

aspects like the distribution, the targeted audiences of the coins and the perception of their images.⁴ In the course of this paradigm shift, the notion that buildings on Roman coins cannot be regarded as accurate depictions of their three-dimensional prototypes has become widely accepted.⁵ The discrepancies between model and representation have to be explained by the artistic intentions of the die engravers: according to Andrew Burnett, the representations are interpretations, rather than reproductions, of buildings.⁶

However, the old and controversial debate as to what extent coin images replicate the appearance of the depicted buildings and monuments is far from being over, as it becomes apparent in the fact that there are several architectural representations on Roman coinage the identification of which is disputed, without any convincing solution in sight.

One example is the ongoing discussion about the famous representation of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus on a denarius of Marcus Volteius, which is dated 75 B.C. and is known for being the first Roman coin issue to feature a temple (fig. 1).⁷ The building is identified by the depiction of three doors indicating the characteristic three *cellae* of this temple, and also by the thunderbolt in the pediment referring to the father of the gods.



Fig. 1: Denarius of M. Volteius, 75 B.C.
Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, 18201813

⁴ See Elkins 2015b, pp. 5–11, with references to the most relevant recent contributions.

⁵ How persistent, however, the traditional approach is can be seen in the monographs of Tameanko 1999 and Hefner 2008, both using architectural representations on Roman coins primarily for reconstruction purposes.

⁶ Burnett 1999, p. 152.

⁷ Fuchs 1969, pp. 17–20, 65–66, 94, pl. 2.16–18; Crawford 1974, pp. 399–400, no. 385/1, pl. 49.3; Prayon 1982, p. 320, pl. 71.1; Hill 1989, p. 24, fig. 27; Tameanko 1999, pp. 140–141 with fig. and pl. 6.63; Hefner 2008, pp. 23 and 29, no. I.1.1A; p. 194, fig. Z.6; Grunow Sobocinski 2014, pp. 451, 453, fig. 24.3; Elkins 2015a, p. 329, fig. 18; Elkins 2015b, pp. 26–27, fig. 23.

There is a long dispute as to which temple is actually depicted here: whether it is the archaic temple burned to the ground in 83 B.C.,⁸ or the second temple built after this fire and dedicated only in 69 B.C.⁹ The problem is that in the mid-70s B.C. when the coin was minted, the Jupiter temple was either a burned-out ruin or a construction site. This is why already Günter Fuchs, in his fundamental monograph of 1969, argued that the coin image does not depict the temple itself but rather the idea of a temple dedicated to Jupiter which had a triple *cella*.¹⁰

Despite Fuchs' observations, the discussion about the realism of this representation is ongoing, as two recent monographs may demonstrate where architectural representations on Roman coinage are approached from very different perspectives.

In Leo Hefner's dissertation on patterns of representing architecture on Roman coins, published in 2008, the representation on the denarius has been regarded as an entirely reliable depiction of the archaic Jupiter temple: first, the author made a drawing of the coin image in order to clarify the details, and then converted his drawing into a detailed reconstruction of the temple itself.¹¹ In doing so, he was completely ignoring the fact that the archeological evidence on the archaic temple of Jupiter Capitolinus has led to quite different results: the temple had six front columns instead of four, it was much more compact in its proportions, and the pediment could hardly have been covered by a gigantic thunderbolt.¹²

In Nathan Elkin's dissertation on architecture on Roman coinage, published in 2015, the same representation has been taken as a reference to reality in a much more cautious but again binary way. Fully aware of the fact that the temple was not standing at the time the coin was minted, the author described the rendering of the building merely as "somewhat imaginative", and then addressed the question again as to whether the features of the depiction looked back to the old form of the temple or rather provided a projected view of the reconstructed building, ending up with the conclusion that the image called the reconstruction project to mind.¹³

The point, however, is that neither attribution can be deduced from the representation itself: neither of the two buildings in question could have had much resemblance to the representation which, apart from the mere existence of the obligatory three front doors, does not sit easily with the archaeological evidence. The iconographic evidence leads to no other conclusion than that it

⁸ Hill 1989, p. 24.

⁹ De Angeli 1996, p. 149 with fig. 99.

¹⁰ Fuchs 1969, pp. 65–66.

¹¹ Hefner 2008, p. 194, fig. Z.6 (drawing of the coin image), and p. 195, fig. Z.6A (reconstruction of the temple).

¹² See, for example, Stamper 2014, pp. 208–212 (with further literature).

¹³ Elkins 2015b, p. 27.

was simply intended here to depict the idea of a temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, without expecting the viewer to identify a particular building.

This case may illustrate the continuously high expectations which are placed on the coins, and exemplify how difficult it is to resist the temptation to refer any architectural representation to a particular three-dimensional model.¹⁴ However, the fact that identification is so difficult in many cases challenges us to ask whether such identification was generally intended.

In this paper, I will consider the question whether architectural representations on Roman coins, as it is generally assumed, were usually linked to an individual model. The focus is on Roman Imperial coins of the period from Nero to Trajan, with emphasis on the Flavian emperors, where architectural motifs occur in larger numbers,¹⁵ and on those architectural motifs the identification of which is controversial. I will begin by giving some examples of the problems facing us. Then I will take a comparative look at similar phenomena in other genres of Roman Imperial art, and finally return to the coins in order to present some results.

“Specific” and “generic” representations

The core problem with the traditional approach to architectural images on coins is that the primary focus, by setting realism as a premise, is not on the visual representations themselves but on the three-dimensional prototypes behind them. To prevent this problem and to take seriously the character of the representations as visual constructions, it is necessary to focus first on the iconography and to determine the degree to which a certain depiction of a building or monument is individualized.

In order to describe the different ways of depicting a building or monument, it has become common practice in research on Roman visual art to make a terminological distinction between “specific” and “generic” representations.¹⁶ Like any other binary categorization, this terminology

¹⁴ This view has not been seriously called into question so far, at least for the time before the mid-second century C.E. According to Nathan Elkins, the situation began to change during the Antonine period: “Under the Antonines [...] another symbolic architectural type emerged: the imaginative” (Elkins 2015b, p. 118), and “more abbreviated and abstracted depictions of architecture” began to appear, many of which “do not appear to have alluded to existing structures” (Elkins 2015b, p. 169). This argument was derived from a coin type of Antoninus Pius, showing the statue of a deity beneath an arch supported by columns, see Elkins 2015b, pp. 94–95, fig. 134 (p. 95: “the stylized nature of the shrine would seem to indicate that no particular structure was meant to be associated with the image”).

¹⁵ During the period from Nero to Trajan, architectural motifs are significantly more common on Roman Imperial coins than before and afterwards; cf. Elkins 2015b, pp. 107–108, 117–118, 168–170.

¹⁶ In contrast to other fields of research on Roman art, this terminology has only hesitantly been adopted by numismatists; see, for example, Burnett 1999, p. 159 (stating a “shift from



Fig. 2: Sestertius of Vespasian, 76 A.D.
London, British Museum

naturally has its problems, such as that the borders between the oppositional categories cannot be clearly defined.¹⁷ These terms, however, have the advantage of not directing the viewer's gaze away from the representations themselves, as other categorizations in numismatic research do; terms such as "realistic" and "unrealistic" immediately focus on the presumed prototypes of the images, whereas the distinction of "denotative" and "connotative architectural types" refers directly to the overall message of the coin.¹⁸ The distinction between more "specific" and more "generic" representations of buildings or monuments can, of course, only be the very first step in approaching the images, before addressing further questions.

Sticking to our example of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, its depictions on Flavian coins would be distinctive examples of more "specific" images. After the complete destruction of the second temple in 69 A.D., a third temple was erected by Vespasian, and in the years before as well as after its dedication in 75 A.D. the new building appears on sestertii and asses of this emperor. On the sestertii, the hexastyle temple is proudly depicted at a very detailed level, with emphasis on the pedimental and acroterial sculptures, as well as on the three cult statues (fig. 2).¹⁹ Only a few years later, in 80 A.D., this building was damaged by fire, and a fourth temple was built and dedicated by

specific to generic representations" in later Roman coinage), or Elkins 2011, p. 649 (where the expression "more generic type" is used as opposed to "more denotative type").

¹⁷ For the problems with these terms: *infra* (with n. 97).

¹⁸ For the distinction between "connotative" and "denotative" architectural types: *infra* (with ns. 74, 100).

¹⁹ RIC II 1² Vespasian 714, 817, 886, 996; Prayon 1982, pp. 327–328, pl. 72.5; Hill 1989, pp. 25–26, fig. 30; R.-Alföldi 2001, pp. 211–212, pl. 1.3; Elkins 2011, p. 646, pl. 1.1; Elkins 2015b, pp. 79–80, fig. 89; Färber 2016, pp. 92–94, fig. 134.



Fig. 3: Cistophorus of Titus, 80–81 A.D.
New York, American Numismatic Society, ANS 1996.110.3

Domitian in 82 A.D. This fourth temple already appears on a cistophorus of Titus, struck in Rome for regional circulation in Asia, in 80 or 81 A.D., so before the new building was completed (fig. 3).²⁰ The construction of the temple is celebrated here by emphasizing its reconstruction by Titus with the inscription **CAPIT(olium) RESTIT(uit)**. The number of front columns is reduced from six to four, and the decoration of the pediment is different, but the temple is, apart from the inscription, clearly identified by the three cult statues.

In many other depictions of temples, however, distinctive features are missing. Several such “generic” representations can be found in an extraordinary and much debated series of coins which celebrate the festival of the *ludi saeculares* – the Secular Games – held in Rome by Domitian in 88 A.D.²¹ This series is so well-suited for a discussion on the question of identification, because it offers several similar representations that all refer to the same event.

On some of these coins the emperor is shown offering a libation with a *patra* over an altar, accompanied by a lyre and a flute player. In some cases a sacrificial animal, sacrificial attendants and/or a reclining personification are added to the scene (figs. 4–7).²² An abbreviated legend features the event by praising Domitian: **CO(n)S(ul) XIII LVD(os) SAEC(ulares) FEC(it)**, i.e. “Consul for the 14th time, he performed the Ludi Saeculares”.²³ On three of

²⁰ RIC II 1² Titus 515; Prayon 1982, pp. 327–328, pl. 72.6; R.-Alföldi 2001, pp. 212–213, pl. 1.4; Elkins 2015b, pp. 146–147.

²¹ For the whole series: Scheid 1998; Grunow Sobocinski 2006 (with further literature).

²² For the different coin types: infra (with ns. 64–68).

²³ Two types of this series have the same phrase in a longer version: **LVD SAEC FECIT** and **LVDOS SAECVL FECIT**, see Grunow Sobocinski 2006, p. 583, n. 3.



Fig. 4: As of Domitian, 88 A.D.
Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, 18211620

these coin types, the sacrifice is situated in front of a temple which in most cases has six front columns.

Scholars have tried to identify these temples by matching each scene with a known event and each architecture with a specific location in Rome. The representation of a victimless sacrifice in front of a temple, for example, has been connected to a sacrifice to Apollo and Diana held at Apollo's temple on the Palatine hill (fig. 4),²⁴ and the sacrifice of a bull, complemented by a *victimarius* and an attendant kneeling to the left, has been associated with a sacrifice to Jupiter held at his great temple on the Capitoline hill (fig. 5),²⁵ so that this temple should be the fourth temple of Jupiter, dedicated by Domitian.

These identifications, however, cannot be based on the iconography of the temples. As demonstrated in detail by Melanie Grunow Sobocinski in her thorough analysis of these coins in 2006, the number of columns varies between four and six from one die to another so that the hexastyle façade has no iconographic significance.²⁶ The same goes for the decoration of the pediments. There are only two different pedimental symbols in the whole series of these coins, an eagle and a wreath, and each coin type has an inconsistent pedimental iconography: wreaths appear quite frequently on each coin type whereas the eagle occurs on only four types – but never in

²⁴ RIC II 1² Domitian 623, 624 (as); Scheid 1998, p. 20, no. 11, fig. 13 (as); Grunow Sobocinski 2006, pp. 591–596, figs. 1.7, 11 and table 1 (as); Elkins 2011, pp. 649–650, pl. 1.6 (as); Elkins 2015b, pp. 82–83 with fig. 99 (as).

²⁵ RIC II 1² Domitian 620 (dupondius), 625 (as); Scheid 1998, p. 19, no. 9, fig. 11 (dupondius); Grunow Sobocinski 2006, pp. 591–596, fig. 1.5 and table 1 (dupondius).

²⁶ Grunow Sobocinski 2006, p. 593; cf. already Scheid 1998, p. 26.



Fig. 5: As of Domitian, 88 A.D. (reverse).
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France,
RC-A-08913



Fig. 7: As of Domitian, 88 A.D. (reverse).
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France,
RC-A-08909



Fig. 6: Dupondius of Domitian, 88 A.D.
Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, 18211638



the pediment of the supposed temple of Jupiter in the background of the bull sacrifice where we would expect to find this symbol of the father of the gods (fig. 5).²⁷ Because of their unspecific iconography and the discrepancies within the same coin types, these temples cannot be connected to specific buildings in Rome.²⁸

²⁷ Grunow Sobocinski 2006, p. 593.

²⁸ This also applies to some other coin types of this series where, instead of sacrifices, other ritual scenes involving Domitian can be seen, each with an unspecific tetrastyle temple, represented in a three-quarter view, in the background; see Grunow Sobocinski 2006,

Ambiguous architectural structures

The matter, however, is more complicated because some coins do not show definable buildings or monuments but architectural structures that are difficult to understand.

This is the case with one of the coin types of Domitian's *ludi saeculares* series, to be found on dupondii and asses (figs. 6–7).²⁹ The sacrificial scene is quite the same as on the above-mentioned coins with a temple in the background (figs. 4–5): Domitian is conducting a libation from a *patera* over a burning altar, accompanied by a flute and a lyra player. An additional figure appears on the left, a reclining male personification with a cornucopia which is usually identified as the Tiber. The architectural structure in the background, however, is completely different from the temples on the other coins. It consists of a row of columns carrying an epistyle, and in the upper zone two lateral gables appear, which on most of these coins are connected by a segment of a circle.

All these basic features, however, vary from coin to coin.³⁰ The quantity as well as the arrangement of the columns is different: five larger columns and four smaller ones between them in the background (fig. 6); six larger columns and five smaller ones; four larger columns and in each of the lateral spaces a pair of smaller ones (fig. 7); or only four columns altogether. A similar wide range of variations can be seen in the upper zone: The two lateral gables can touch each other and be overtopped by the central arch, all sharing the same entablature (fig. 6); they can be separated from each other by the arch positioned between them (fig. 7); and there is one variant where the middle section is not arched but gabled. The decoration of the gables varies too: They are decorated with wreaths (figs. 6–7), with garlands, with *paterae*, or with nothing at all.

The diversity in representation has led to diverging interpretations of this structure. Some scholars have seen a single unified façade, others identify several buildings depicted in perspective. The theories in favor of a single building range from a two-story *porticus*³¹ to a “double temple”.³² Filippo Coarelli, by contrast, has opted for a combination of several buildings and

pp. 590–592, figs. 1.2, 7 (distribution of *suffimenta*), figs. 1.3a–b, 8 (acceptance of *fruges*), figs. 1.8, 9 and table 1.4 (figures kneeling at a temple, interpreted as matrons in prayer to Juno on the Capitoline hill).

²⁹ RIC II 1² Domitian 621 (dupondius), 627 (as); Scheid 1998, p. 19, no. 7, fig. 9 (dupondius); Grunow Sobocinski 2006, pp. 591–596, figs. 1.6a–b (dupondius), 12 (dupondius), 13 (as), 14 (dupondius), table 1 (dupondius).

³⁰ For a full discussion of the variety in details see Grunow Sobocinski 2006, pp. 594–596.

³¹ Ryberg 1955, pp. 175–176 with fig. 105e.

³² BMCRE II, p. 396, no. 432 (“double temple [...] with two pediments”); RIC II 1² Domitian 621, 627; Elkins 2015b, p. 178 (“temple with two pediments”).

interpreted the architecture as two lateral temples and an arch between them in the background, supplemented by a temporary colonnade in the foreground.³³ And Eugenio La Rocca, followed by Philip Hill, has explained the whole architecture as a temporary wooden theater that was erected in the Tarentum, near the Tiber, specifically for Domitian's *ludi saeculares*.³⁴

According to the latter argument, which is currently the most favored one, the tripartite roofline reflects the three main divisions of the theater stage, and the alternation between large and small columns as well as the division of the façade into two levels reflect the articulation of the backdrop. In her article on the *ludi saeculares* coins, Melanie Grunow Sobocinski too favors this interpretation as the *scaenae frons* design of a temporary theater but, on the other hand, we can certainly join her in conceding that “the variations in this coin type are frustrating”.³⁵

A problem that underlies this frustration is that this architectural structure cannot be identified with any familiar building type. While it is possible that this structure was intended to refer to something real, the real point is that there are no parallels whatsoever for such a construction in Roman coinage. Parallels can, however, be found in other genres of Roman art.

II. A comparative look at Roman relief sculpture

Unspecific architectural structures in Roman reliefs

A comparable architectural composition appears on some of the so-called Campana reliefs, which are rectangular terracotta plaques that were produced in early Imperial Roman times and the majority of which have been found in Rome. There are two types of these particular reliefs that show an architectural façade with statues between the columns. One type shows a statue of Hercules in the center, the other a statue of Mercury.

The architecture on the Hercules-reliefs, as a well-preserved specimen in Vienna may illustrate, consists of two large Corinthian columns in the middle which support an entablature and a pediment decorated with two sea creatures holding a round shield (fig. 8).³⁶ On each side there are two lower columns carrying an entablature which is surmounted by two semi-circular arches and palmettes looming from the spandrels. In the intercolumniations statues on low bases are displayed: a frontal nude and bearded Hercules in the

³³ Coarelli 1968, pp. 33–37, fig. 11; Coarelli 1999, pp. 21–22 with fig. 8.

³⁴ La Rocca 1984, pp. 45–55, esp. pp. 50–53, pls. 4, 5.1; Hill 1989, p. 46, figs. 69, 70.

³⁵ Grunow Sobocinski 2006, p. 595.

³⁶ Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. no. ANSA V 1895. Ritter 1995, pp. 217–220 with n. 698 (further literature), pl. 15.4.



Fig. 8: “Campana relief”.

Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. no. ANSA V 1895

center, flanked by four figures of athletes. The Mercury-reliefs have the same sort of colonnade but no pedimental structure.³⁷ The two central columns are only a little larger and carry a simple epistyle. The statue of Mercury, in the central intercolumniation, is flanked by herms and large vases. The two relief types compare to one another in dimensions, style and painting, so that they were very likely once fixed to a wall in an alternating sequence. The decoration of the intercolumniations, with statues of athletes, herms and statues of Hercules and Mercury, both of which are closely linked to the world of the gymnasium, refer to the domain of the *palaestra*. The reliefs were probably set into the walls of the *palaestra*-like garden of a Roman villa.

The debate over which type of architecture is depicted here is quite controversial. According to the most common view, the two reliefs depict a *palaestra* in combination with a temple, of which two columns, the pediment and the large cult statue of Hercules are visible. There are, however, some problems with this theory.³⁸ The pediment exceeds the two large columns

³⁷ Ritter 1995, p. 218 with n. 700 (further literature).

³⁸ For a full discussion and the following arguments see Ritter 1995, pp. 218–220.

each by one column bay so that two more large columns are missing, and the two lateral entablatures end abruptly at the central columns so that two more columns would be necessary to carry their weight. If this was a combination of two real buildings – a colonnade combined with a temple –, then the large and small columns shown in one row side by side should be imagined behind each other in two rows, but how they are structurally related to each other remains completely unclear from the picture.

These discrepancies already make it quite unlikely that this is a depiction of a real architectural setting. Our suspicion is further corroborated by the semi-circular arches set side by side above the epistyle and crowned by palmettes. This construction is difficult to imagine in reality, and rather reminds us of architectural prospects found in Roman Second Style wall painting. One of the most elaborate comparanda is the west-wall in the Triclinium 14 of the so-called Villa di Poppaea of Oplontis.³⁹ The two central Corinthian and other columns in the foreground carrying projecting entablatures form an architectural prospect which is not linked to the colonnaded spaces in the background. How far from any reality this architectural setting is, becomes particularly obvious in the round temple placed in the center above the lintel of the entrance gate: this temple as well as the two converging colonnades behind are not fixed to the ground but seem to float in the air. And here again we can find semi-circular arches which are set onto the entablatures without having any structural function. They have their own value as autonomous decorative motifs, in the same way as seen in the “Campana reliefs”.

Imaginary architecture deviating from physical realities can be found in Roman relief sculpture, from Late Republican times onwards, not only in so-called “decorative” reliefs but also in those reliefs to which, because they show scenes from “every-day life”, a high degree of realism is attributed.

A controversially debated case is a marble relief from the middle of the first century A.D., now in Florence, that was found in Rome and probably once decorated the façade of a tomb (fig. 9).⁴⁰ It shows the sale of cloth, with two seated clients wearing a toga, who are accompanied by a standing attendant; the clients are looking at a large piece of cloth held out for inspection by two men, and in the center the shop owner is seen supervising the sale. The scene takes place in front of a quite elaborate architectural façade. It consists of four carefully fluted pilasters with richly decorated bases and Corinthian capitals, two of which flank the scene while the two central columns occupy the background. The epistyle carries a wall made of ashlar masonry with four rectangular windows with open shutters. The whole construction is covered by a roof of carefully laid tiles.

³⁹ Stinson 2011, pp. 411–415, fig. 7.

⁴⁰ Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi, inv. no. 315. Ritter 2014, pp. 166–167 with n. 15 (bibliography), fig. 1.

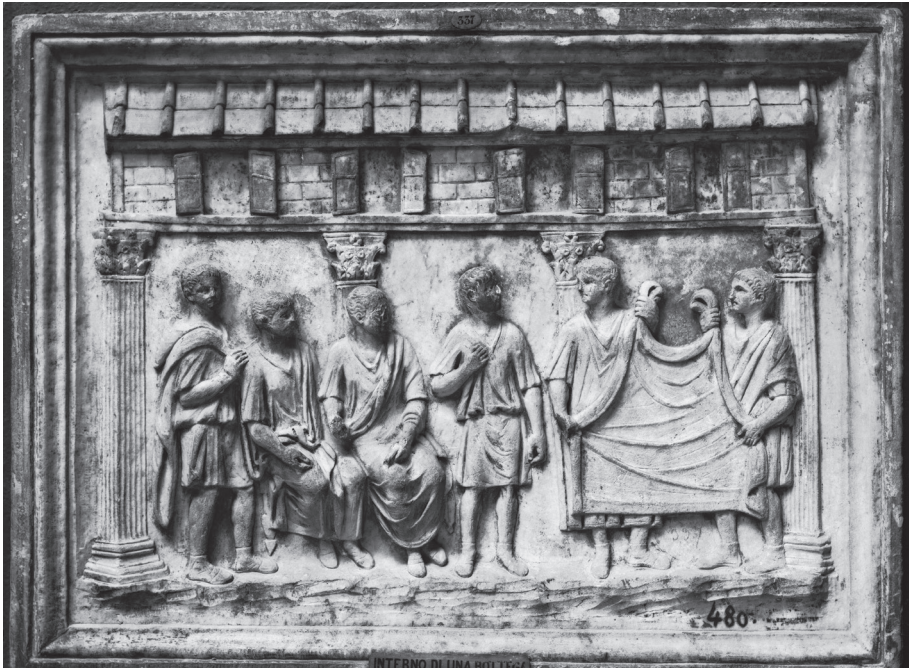


Fig. 9: Funerary relief.
Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi, inv. no. 315

This architecture has usually been interpreted as the exterior of a shop, but it is quite an ambiguous structure.⁴¹ The upper part with the row of windows indicates the upper floor of a domestic setting, whereas the lower part seems a little too prestigious for that. The carefully rendered pilasters carrying an epistyle rather remind us of representations of public architecture. The upper and the lower parts of this façade are composed by different elements. This is quite similar to the additive composition of the façade on the “Campana relief” in Vienna (fig. 8), which can as well not be typologically classified.

The mixture of architectural elements in the façade obviously has to do with the character of the activities going on. The sculptor seems to have intended to set an appropriate stage for the figures in order to signal the prestige of the cloth merchant: by emphasizing the noble wares, the upper-class-clients, and last but not least the grand architectural setting. The intention was obviously to show that the scene takes place in an urban context. This fact is made evident here by the nature of the activities as well as by the unspecific but clearly urban architectural background.

⁴¹ For the following arguments see Ritter 2014, pp. 166–167.

Different ways of identifying temples and other building types in Roman reliefs

The phenomenon that the location of a scene is primarily made evident by the figural scene and not by the architectural background can also be found in those depictions, in which the architecture is specified as a well-defined building type such as a temple.

A relief in the Villa Albani which belongs to a famous series of archaistic marble reliefs found in and around Rome shows Apollo holding his kithara and followed by Diana and Leto, in combination with the personification of Victory pouring a libation at an altar (fig. 10).⁴² The figures are positioned in front of a wall, probably of a sanctuary, bordered on the left by a tripod on a high pillar. Behind the wall a lavishly decorated temple appears, of which the front and side are visible. The temple has Corinthian columns, the architrave is decorated with a meander motif, and the frieze with a chariot race. The pediment shows two antithetic sea creatures carrying a central shield that is decorated with the head of Medusa.

This relief type was created in Early Augustan times, in the aftermath of Octavian's naval victories of Naulochos in 36 B.C. and at Actium in 31 B.C. which he believed to have won with the help of his favored god Apollo. The popularity of these reliefs is understandable in the context of Augustus' ostentatious veneration of Apollo, culminating in the erection of the temple of Apollo on the Palatine hill in Rome, which was dedicated in 28 B.C. and directly connected to Augustus' residence. In light of the historical and ideological circumstances these reliefs most likely refer to the new and prominent temple of Apollo Palatinus.

This reference, however, is indicated solely by the figural scene showing Apollo in combination with Victory, but is not obvious from the appearance of the temple itself. Despite the fact that the temple on the Palatine hill had six columns in front,⁴³ the decoration of the building is entirely conventional, including the decoration of the pediment: The two sea creatures carrying a shield were a very common motif, as we saw in discussing the "Campana relief" in Vienna (fig. 8). The temple in the Villa Albani relief is as unspecific as the temple in the sacrificial scenes on Domitian's *ludi saeculares* coins which are supposed to refer to the sacrifice to Apollo and Diana held at the same Temple of Apollo on the Palatine hill (fig. 4).

When Roman relief sculptors wanted to identify a building or monument they usually made this intention clear. How flexible they were in doing so becomes especially evident in those cases where a building or monument

⁴² Rome, Villa Albani, inv. no. 1014. Cain 1989 (with bibliography); Färber 2016, pp. 106–109, fig. 177.

⁴³ Zink 2008.



Fig. 10: Marble relief panel.
Rome, Villa Albani, inv. no. 1014

itself has survived so that we are able to compare the representation with its three-dimensional model.

A good example is a famous relief from the “Tomb of the Haterii” in Rome which shows several buildings and monuments situated in the capital and has been convincingly interpreted as a compilation of Flavian building projects, in which Q. Haterius Tychicus, a building contractor, had been involved (fig. 11).⁴⁴

Among them is the Colosseum dedicated by Titus in 80 A.D. The exterior of this spectacular building is clearly identified by its main characteristics: the three stories structured by arches which are separated from each other by half-columns; the statues within the arches of the upper stories such as they were once displayed here; and in the lower central arch one of the interior staircases can be seen.

The second monument from the right is an arch labeled as **ARCUS IN SACRA VIA SUMMA**. This description clearly points to the Arch of Titus.

⁴⁴ Rome, Musei Vaticani, Museo Gregoriano Profano, inv. no. 9997. Sinn – Freyberger 1996, pp. 63–76, cat. no. 8, fig. 9, pls. 20–24; Färber 2016, pp. 47–51, fig. 40 (for the representation of the Colosseum) and pp. 52–56, fig. 41 (for the Arch of Titus, with further literature).

There are some general correspondences in the basic structure, such as the single passageway, and the four front columns standing on high pedestals. Almost all specific features, however, are very far from the real appearance of the structure. The arch on the relief has a double attic instead of a single one. A richly decorated pediment is added to the attic zone. And, above all, the decoration is completely different, as seen, for example, in the decoration of the lateral walls with figures of Mars (left) and Victory (right). The addition of Mars, Victoria and (probably) Roma in the passageway is probably to be understood as an abstract substrate of the iconographic program of the arch focused on the military virtues of Titus.

In contrast to the Colosseum which is clearly identified by its iconography, the structural and decorative differences in the representation of the arch are so prevalent that no viewer would have been able to recognize the prototype without the help of the inscription.

The diversity of architectural representations in Roman reliefs

If we have a comparative look at these reliefs, the representations of architecture can be divided roughly into three categories.

Firstly, there are individual buildings which are clearly identified either by their individual architectural design (as the Colosseum) or by an inscription (as the Arch of Titus) (fig. 11).

Secondly, there are buildings which also belong to a well-defined building type but are not identified as a specific building, neither by their iconography nor by an inscription. This applies, for example, to the temple on the relief in the Villa Albani (fig. 10). The only indication that this richly, but not specifically decorated temple might be the temple of Apollo on the Palatine hill is given by the identity of the gods in the foreground and their interaction (the combination of Apollo and Victory). Within the whole composition and its meaning, the identification of the temple is clearly secondary to the importance of the figures and their activities in the foreground.

And then there is a third category in relief sculpture that has often been neglected. This group includes those architectural settings that resist a labeling and a definite classification because they cannot be identified with any particular building type. This is the case with the “Campana reliefs” depicting Hercules, where an inconsistent colonnade-like architecture is supplemented with other elements such as a large pediment or a row of crowning arches; the fact that this setting points to the ambience of the *palaestra* is only indicated by the statues displayed between the columns (fig. 8).

Such unspecific architecture can mainly be found in figural scenes where the architectural motif primarily has the purpose of giving the activities a prestigious background. This applies to the sales relief in Florence where



Fig. 11: Relief from the tomb of the Haterii (detail).
Rome, Musei Vaticani, Museo Gregoriano Profano, inv. no. 9997

an urban ambience is indicated mainly by the commercial activities in the foreground (fig. 9). Here we can see the same hierarchy between dominant foreground activities and a secondary background architecture as in the relief in the Villa Albani (fig. 10).

III. Background architecture and its secondary significance on coins

Representations of architecture in Roman coinage show the same variety in iconographic specification as in Roman relief sculpture, and can be separated into the same three general categories. Firstly, there are individual buildings that can clearly be identified by their iconography and/or an inscription (figs. 1–3). Secondly, there are unspecific buildings, such as temples, that are not sufficiently individualized to identify them (figs. 4–5). And then, finally, there are architectural settings that are difficult to classify all together (figs. 6–7).

Ambiguous structures in the background

The colonnade-like architecture on Domitian's *ludi saeculares* coins, as shown above, could hardly have been identified by the viewer as a theater or any other building type because none of the interpretations discussed can point to any iconographic parallels in coinage (figs. 6–7). There are, however, other similar cases on early Imperial Roman coins.



Fig. 12: Sestertius of Nero, ca. 64 A.D.
Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, 18200248

Our first example is a series of Neronian sestertii showing the emperor addressing his troops in a **ADLOCVT(io) COH(ortium)**.⁴⁵ On some of these coins, an architectural structure can be seen in the background, consisting of three columns or pillars that support some sort of sloping roof, decorated with stripes which may or may not indicate tiles (fig. 12).⁴⁶ This structure has been interpreted by Harold Mattingly as a “high building, showing three pillars, with sloping roof”.⁴⁷ On some other coins of the same series, the semi-circular upper part of the background architecture looks somewhat different and consists of straight edges, joined by roughly triangular projectures (fig. 13).⁴⁸ This discrepancy led Mattingly to separate the upper part from the pillared building in the near background, and to propose to identify it as the wall of the praetorian camp, crowned with battlements.⁴⁹ This identification has since been generalized and adopted for all variants of this reverse type,⁵⁰ but there are several problems. This particular representation has no similarity whatsoever with the depiction of the Praetorian camp on

⁴⁵ RIC I² Nero 95–97, 130–136 (Rome), 371, 386–388, 429, 489–492, 564–565 (Lugdunum).

⁴⁶ BMCRE I, p. 259, nos. 303–304 (pl. 45.18); RIC I² Nero 387, 491 (pl. 21) (Lugdunum); Fuchs 1969, p. 46, pl. 13.137; Kent – Overbeck – Stylow 1973, p. 102, no. 203, pl. 52.

⁴⁷ BMCRE I, p. 259 (“in the background is a high building, showing three pillars, with sloping roof”).

⁴⁸ RIC I² Nero 130 (pl. 19) (Rome); Fuchs 1969, p. 46, pl. 13.138; Elkins 2015b, p. 76, fig. 80.

⁴⁹ BMCRE I, p. 218, no. 122 (pl. 41.5): “In near background is a building, showing two pillars, with sloping roof, and behind it, the wall of the praetorian camp (?), in crescent shape, with battlements (?)”.

⁵⁰ RIC I² 156 (for Nero, Reverse type 1 [Adlocutio]); Elkins 2015b, pp. 76, 176 (for this reverse type in general).



Fig. 13: Sestertius of Nero, ca. 64 A.D.
London, British Museum

coins of Claudius.⁵¹ The irregular shape of the projectures makes it difficult to interpret them as battlements, and in one, otherwise quite similar variant of this reverse type this element is completely missing.⁵² The enormous iconographic variety among these representations does not allow them to be distinguished into different groups. We can thus sympathize with Günter Fuchs, who chose to describe all these depictions only vaguely as “variants of some curious building” which, because of its fragile appearance, might possibly be only a baldachin.⁵³ Indeed, the general structural similarities make it seem advisable to interpret all these representations as variants of one and the same background structure, and make the hypothesis very unlikely that the common *adlocutio* scene was intended to be presented in different settings. The crucial point, with regard to identification, is that the details vary from die to die, so that it remains a mystery in which way an ancient viewer might have been able to identify a particular location here. On some coins of this series, the figures are larger in size and have no architectural background at all,⁵⁴

⁵¹ RIC I² Claudius 7–8, 19–20, 25–26, 36–37; Elkins 2015b, pp. 71–72, fig. 71. The Claudian representations of the Praetorian camp show a wall with battlements on top, and behind it a building with a triangular pediment and two pillars, flanked by battlemented walls or towers.

⁵² RIC I² Nero 134 (Rome).

⁵³ Fuchs 1969, p. 46 (“Varianten eines eigenartigen Bauwerks”), p. 137 (referring to pl. 13. 137–138: “Ansprache Neros an die Truppen, mit Baldachin”).

⁵⁴ BMCRE I, p. 219, nos. 124–125 (Rome).



Fig. 14: Sestertius of Nero, ca. 64 A.D.
Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, 18203201

which clearly indicates that the architecture is of only secondary importance in these *adlocutio* scenes.

Similarly puzzling is a sestertius, on which Nero is distributing his second *congiarium*, a donation to the people of Rome (fig. 14).⁵⁵ The emperor is seated on a platform, and in the background, behind a statue of Minerva, an architecture can be seen consisting of four columns or pillars and a thin epistyle. This structure was described by Harold Mattingly as a “low building with flat roof”,⁵⁶ but there is no roof visible. Philipp Hill interpreted the scenery as “a glimpse of four columns of the Horrea Agrippiana”,⁵⁷ but it is hard to imagine that a viewer should have been able to recognize a warehouse in this case. In view of the unspecific iconography, Günter Fuchs, again, cautiously resisted any identification and described the scenery vaguely as a representation of spacious architectural settings of some kind.⁵⁸ Here again, the figural scene is placed in front of an architectural façade that is not clearly characterized as a specific building type.

This phenomenon does not occur very often but it is highly relevant for the general question whether any architectural representation on early Imperial Roman coins refers to a particular prototype that was expected to be identified.

⁵⁵ RIC I² Nero 102, 158–162, 505–506; Fuchs 1969, p. 46, pls. 13.140, 14.141; Kent – Overbeck – Stylow 1973, p. 101, no. 194, pl. 5; Hill 1989, p. 77, fig. 136; Elkins 2015b, p. 77.

⁵⁶ BMCRE I, p. 225, nos. 139–140 (pl. 42.2): “low building with flat roof showing four pillars”.

⁵⁷ Hill 1989, p. 77.

⁵⁸ Fuchs 1969, p. 46 (“umfangreichere Wiedergaben weitläufiger Architekturzusammenhänge”). Cf. Elkins 2015b, p. 77 (“a pillared structure”).



Fig. 15: Sestertius of Caligula, 37–38 A.D.
Staatliche Münzsammlung München

Temples in the background

All the unspecific architectural structures mentioned above can be found in combination with a figural scene in the foreground (figs. 6–7, 12–14). This in turn leads to the question in which way well-defined building types, most often temples, were identified when they appear in the background of a scene.

Basically, there are three ways to identify a temple on coins: by adding an inscription, by adding one or more cult statues indicating which god/s the temple belongs to, or by depicting its individual decoration, especially the pediment figures. When a temple appears in the background of a figural scene, the limited space made it more difficult to give it a distinctive iconography or to add its name.

These difficulties become apparent in representations of the temple of Divus Augustus on sestertii of Caligula where the emperor can be seen participating in a bull sacrifice in front of a richly ornamented temple, which is identified by the inscription **DIVO AVGVSTO** (fig. 15).⁵⁹ Here, the available space is filled with iconographic details and letters to an unusual extent. In almost all other depictions of sacrifices held in front of a temple, the building is not labeled, obviously as the addition of space filling letters on both sides of the figural scene was not considered particularly attractive.⁶⁰

Usually a background temple is not specified, either by an inscription or by its iconography. In such cases, we have to check if the identity of the building

⁵⁹ RIC I² Gaius/Caligula 36, 44, 51; Fuchs 1969, pp. 45, 111–116, pl. 10.112–113; Hill 1989, p. 20, fig. 18; Elkins 2015b, p. 71, fig. 70.

⁶⁰ See already Fuchs 1969, p. 114 who characterizes the inscription **DIVO AVGVSTO** as “eine die Gesamtkomposition merklich störende Beischrift”.



Fig. 16: Sestertius of Hadrian, ca. 125–128 A.D.
London, British Museum

is revealed at least indirectly, either by specific activities in the foreground or by distinctive motifs outside the building itself.

The latter phenomenon can be found on a Hadrianic sestertertius, on which the emperor is seen addressing a group of citizens from a podium in front of a temple (fig. 16).⁶¹ The decoration of the podium with ships' prows points to the Rostra Iulia on the Forum Romanum, so that the temple behind this podium must be the temple of Divus Iulius.⁶² But the temple itself is very sketchily drawn, having only two columns at the front and two at the side. It seems to have been intended to locate the activities on the Forum Romanum, but the identity of the temple itself is secondary, and its identification was obviously not necessary in order to understand the scene.

This leads us back to the temples on Domitian's *ludi saeculares* coins (figs. 4–5), the identification of which, as shown above, cannot be based on their unspecific iconography.⁶³ That is why we have to check if their surroundings indicate which temples these are.

Previous scholars have tried to match each sacrificial scene with one of the sacrifices which, according to the written sources, were held during the *ludi saeculares* at different locations in Rome. Among the images with a temple in the background, the bull sacrifice, as mentioned above, has been associated

⁶¹ RIC II Hadrian 639–641; Hill 1989, p. 23, fig. 22; Burnett 1999, p. 142, fig. 108; Elkins 2015b, pp. 92–93, fig. 127.

⁶² Amanda Claridge (2007, pp. 91–92, fig. 13) has recently proposed to identify the temple with “Hadrian’s new hexastyle Corinthian temple of Divus Trajan” (p. 92). This identification met with some approval (as, for example, by Elkins 2015b, pp. 92–93) but the *rostra* clearly point to the Forum Romanum.

⁶³ *Supra* (with ns. 26–27).

with a sacrifice to Jupiter on the Capitolium (fig. 5),⁶⁴ and the victimless sacrifice with a sacrifice to Apollo on the Palatine hill (fig. 4).⁶⁵ A third type, on dupondii, shows the sacrifice of a goat and a sheep in front of the same sort of temple, and has been connected to a sacrifice to the Moirai held in the area of the Tarentum.⁶⁶ Another sacrificial scene, on sestertii, has no background architecture at all and shows the sacrifice of a pig in the presence of the reclining figure of Tellus, which has been attributed to a sacrifice to Terra Mater in the Tarentum.⁶⁷ And then there is, finally, the victimless sacrifice in front of the tripartite architecture discussed above, which has been connected to a sacrifice to the Ilithyiae held in the area of the Tarentum as well (figs. 6–7).⁶⁸

These localizations can only be based on the different kinds of victims – bull, pig, goat and sheep –, and then, in the two cases without any victim, be attained by process of elimination.⁶⁹ The victims are the key for identifying the scenes, so that the situation would be similar to the Villa Albani relief where the distinctive character of the figural scene provides a hint to the identity of the temple behind (fig. 10).⁷⁰ The prevailing opinion is that a viewer who knew where the individual rituals had taken place during the Secular Games in 88 A.D. was able to identify the different locations.

This hypothesis, however, raises some problems. The different victims were not each restricted to a specific deity. Which deity the sacrifice is addressed to is not clarified on any of these coins.⁷¹ The two almost identical libations without any victim can hardly have been associated with a specific ritual (figs. 4, 6–7).⁷² And, above all, there is no correlation between the ritual acts and the layout of the background, i.e. the presence of a temple, its substitution with a vague façade, or the complete omission of any architecture. As far as the temples are concerned, the matter is different from the Hadrianic coins mentioned above where at least a hint to the localization of the temple is

⁶⁴ Supra (with n. 25).

⁶⁵ Supra (with n. 24).

⁶⁶ RIC II 1² Domitian 619, 628; Scheid 1998, p. 19, no. 6, fig. 8; Grunow Sobocinski 2006, pp. 591–596, figs. 1.4, 10 and table 1; Elkins 2011, pp. 649–650, pl. 1.7; Elkins 2015b, pp. 82–83, fig. 100.

⁶⁷ RIC II 1² Domitian 612–614; Scheid 1998, p. 19, no. 8, fig. 10; Grunow Sobocinski 2006, pp. 591–596, fig. 1.9 and table 1.

⁶⁸ Supra (with n. 29).

⁶⁹ See, for example, Elkins 2015b, pp. 83, 107 (“the type of sacrifice denoted the location and event, not the generic temple”).

⁷⁰ Supra (with n. 42).

⁷¹ On the coins showing a pig sacrifice, Tellus is not the addressee.

⁷² It is because of such problems that John Scheid (1998, pp. 24, 27–33) came to the conclusion from the perspective of religious studies that the sacrifices on these coins mix details from different rituals.

given by the representation of the *rostra* (fig. 16). On the *ludi saeculares* coins, no such clues are forthcoming.

“Denotative” vs. “connotative” coin types?

In order to handle these difficulties, Melanie Grunow Sobocinski and then, inspired by her, Nathan Elkins contributed numismatic arguments to the debate. By analyzing the presence of Domitian’s *ludi saeculares* coins in coin finds, the authors demonstrated that those asses which show the libation scene without a victim in front of a temple (fig. 4) were issued in significantly larger quantities than the higher denominations – sestertius and dupondius –, and that they were also found in greater numbers in the north-western provinces of the Empire.⁷³ These facts led them to the conclusion that the asses with a victimless sacrifice were targeted to a wider audience than the coins showing a victim.

In order to gain a handle on this sort of interrelation between iconography, message and audience targeting, Elkins introduced the terms “denotative” and “connotative”. “Denotative types” are images that “were straightforward, denoting clear and specific messages attached to recent events”, while “connotative types” “were more symbolic, connoting broader ideals or concepts”.⁷⁴

This model, however, does not work with the *ludi saeculares* coins.⁷⁵ The “connotative” scene showing a victimless sacrifice in front of a temple is not only found on asses (fig. 4) but on higher denominations too, while the “denotative” representation of a bull sacrifice appears not only on dupondii but on asses as well (fig. 5).⁷⁶

The main objection, however, is that this model draws an artificial dividing line between the images of this coin series. Any such separation leads to inconsistencies, and one has to decide on which common programmatic level the images should be interpreted. Either one associates the victimless sacrifice (fig. 4), in accordance with the other images (fig. 5), with a particular sacrifice, and thus treats it as “denotative” as well. Or one regards this particular representation, in contrast to the sacrifices comprising an animal, as “connotative”, and disregards the idea of a limited, well-informed audience which was able to attribute all these sacrificial scenes to individual events: because the sacrifice to Apollo and Diana, which this scene is

⁷³ Grunow Sobocinski 2006, pp. 597–599 with table 2; Elkins 2011, pp. 649–650 with figs. 4–5.

⁷⁴ Elkins 2011, pp. 645–646. – For the problems with these terms cf. *infra* (with n. 100).

⁷⁵ For the *ludi saeculares* coins see Elkins 2011, pp. 649, 653; Elkins 2015b, pp. 83, 115 (“Of those, the *sestertii* and the *dupondii* were the most denotative in depicting specific events”).

⁷⁶ See Grunow Sobocinski 2006, pp. 597–598, table 2.

associated with, would be missing within the supposed series of subsequent ritual events.

This binary categorization is thus too strict to help solve the main problem with the *ludi saeculares* coins: The sacrificial scenes could have been identified and localized solely by means of elimination, and this implies that the viewer had all these coin types available and was therefore able to look at them as a group⁷⁷ and then bring them into the correct order. This scenario is quite improbable. It might well be, of course, that the authorities in charge of designing these coin images had a precise and detailed idea of the various ceremonies during the festivities of 88 A.D. But whatever they might have had in mind, the die engravers did not do much to specify the locations, and definitely did not use the architectural motifs to do so. In view of the available evidence, one must seriously doubt the presupposition that even an urban Roman viewer, even if he had participated in the festivities of 88 A.D. and was blessed with a good memory, was expected to tie the single images to specific gods and to specific locations in Rome.

If one tries to interpret this coin series as a documentation of successive events, one faces one difficulty after another. These problems can be avoided by ordering the images not consecutively, i.e. in the sense of a chronological sequence, but structurally: by making a clear distinction between primary and secondary motifs and by analyzing them according to their relative importance.

Rigidly fixating on the presence or absence of a victim causes one to isolate and overemphasize one single, secondary element within the composition. These images are structured by a graduated hierarchy of single motifs. What we can see on these coins are simply quite conventional libation scenes, some of which contain an additional reference to the following bloody sacrifice. The central and dominating motif is the libation conducted by the emperor, with musical accompaniment; the emperor and the two musicians are the only indispensable figures. All other motifs are secondary and dispensable: the victims, the personifications and, last but not least, the architecture.

The secondary role of the temples does help to understand not only why none of them are specified by an individual appearance, but can also explain something else: the strange phenomenon that temples can have an odd number of front columns. Within the *ludi saeculares* series, this is the case with some asses showing the victimless sacrifice in front of a temple that has five columns at the front (fig. 4). Such an extraordinary neglect of architectural realities can hardly be explained by anything other than that the temples provide only a decorative backdrop to the scenery and therefore had an absolutely subordinate role.

⁷⁷ Grunow Sobocinski 2006, p. 592 has rightly pointed out this problem.

The message of all these coins is fully focused on the person of the emperor. What these coins emphasize is the piety of Domitian that he had impressively demonstrated by conducting several sacrifices and other rituals within a few days during the Secular Games of 88 A.D. This is explicitly made clear by the inscription **LVD(os) SAEC(ulares) FEC(it)** on each of these coins, saying that he, Domitian himself, “performed the Ludi Saeculares”. This core message was visualized by an extraordinary variety of scenes showing Domitian conducting several sacrifices.

On some coins, this message is emphasized by giving the scenery an additional sacral touch in the shape of a temple, whereas on other coins the same scene, by adding an elegant but unspecific façade, simply receives an architectural backdrop or no background at all, which was regarded to be adequate as well. Melanie Grunow Subocinski’s statement that the architectural motifs on these coins “imply an urban setting, but nothing more”⁷⁸ is thus to be supported.

With regard to the significance that an architectural background can have on Roman coins, Domitian’s *ludi saeculares* coins are of exemplary value. The fact that, within this rich series of images, the temples have the same importance as the ominous tripartite structure demonstrates by example that architectural motifs, regardless of their form, could have an absolutely marginal significance.

IV. Buildings and monuments as main motifs and their identifiers

If we accept that architectural structures cannot always have been expected to be identified, we must go about understanding the variety in their representations differently. The next question hence becomes what significance architectural settings could have on coins in general. Background architecture, as shown above, is always secondary. But even when a building or monument is the main motif, that does not mean that it necessarily plays the primary role. Representations of buildings and monuments on coins do not form a coherent group because the images consist of various single elements, including inscriptions, that are put in a hierarchical relation to each other and could be combined and weighted in different ways.

⁷⁸ Grunow Sobocinski 2006, p. 599: “the architecture is more suggestive than revealing of the locations of ritual. They imply an urban setting but nothing more”.

Additional inscriptions and their different ways
of referring to a building or monument

The most crucial element that gives a building or monument a context and defines its meaning is an additional inscription, which goes beyond the name and titles of the emperor. Such an inscription provides the most direct hint as to how the coin image was intended to be understood and which significance was attributed to the architecture within the overall message of the coin. The inscriptions can refer to the architecture in different ways: directly, indirectly, or not at all.

On many Roman coins, the inscription has the primary aim of giving the building or monument a name. A prominent example is the representation of the Ara Pacis on Neronian asses where the monument is named in the nominative case in the legend **ARA PACIS** (fig. 17).⁷⁹ In cases like this, the message is fully focused on the building or monument itself.



Fig. 17: As of Nero, ca. 66 A.D.
Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, 18221644

In other cases where the legend directly refers to the architecture, the emphasis is different. This applies especially to those coins where the emperor is praised for having erected or reconstructed a building or monument. On the cistophorus of Titus (fig. 3), for example, the message is focused on the emperor and not on the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, which is only the object in the legend **CAPIT**(olium) **RESTIT**(uit).

Another category are coins where the inscription refers only indirectly to the architecture. On Caligula's sestertii showing the temple of Divus Augustus, the legend **DIVO AVGV**(usto) is not primarily intended to name

⁷⁹ *Infra* (with n. 87).



Fig. 18: As of Vespasian, 72 A.D.
Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, 18228533

the temple but, given the dative case, to indicate who the addressee of the sacrifice performed in the foreground is (fig. 15). The main figure is Caligula, who demonstrates his piety towards Divus Augustus by dedicating a temple to him. This message is also pointed out on the obverse where the emperor's head is substituted with the seated personification of **PIETAS**.⁸⁰

In several representations of altars, the intention to praise the emperor is explicitly made clear by naming one of his virtues in direct connection with the architecture. On asses of Vespasian showing the Tiberian Ara Providentiae, the legend **PROVIDENT**(iae) does not label the monument but refers to the imperial virtue of *providentia* which probably was attributed to Vespasian in the dative case (figs. 18–19),⁸¹ by analogy with the representation of an altar on coins of Domitian having the legend **SALVTI AVGVSTI**.⁸² Accordingly, these legends do not give the full name of the altar, including **ARA**, which also shows that the focus is not on the monument but on the emperor.

And then there are coins where the legend is completely focused on praising the emperor, without any reference to the architecture. This applies to the above-mentioned representations with background architecture, such as Nero's sestertii showing the emperor performing an **ADLOCVT**(io) **COH**(ortium) (figs. 12–13) or distributing his **CONG**(iarium) **II DAT**(um) **POP**(ulo) (fig. 14). It also pertains to Domitian's coins where the legend **LVD**(os) **SAEC**(ulares) **FEC**(it) celebrates him for having performed the outstanding festivities in 88 A.D. (figs. 4–7).

⁸⁰ Cf. Elkins 2015b, p. 71.

⁸¹ For the varying iconography of the altar on these coins: infra (with ns. 88–89).

⁸² RIC II 1² Domitian 208–210, 224–228, 304–305, 385, 418; Färber 2016, pp. 138–140, fig. 140.



Fig. 19: As of Vespasian, 71 A.D.
London, British Museum

Iconography and its relevance for identification

The second most important criterion in identifying a building or monument is its iconography, i.e. if and in what detail the appearance of the architecture is specified.

In this respect, we need to be aware of the difficulties in giving a building or monument an individual appearance, especially when the available image space is as limited as it is on a coin. Whereas each building or monument is of course unique, the possibilities of its iconographic specification in a coin image heavily depended on which type of building or monument it was.

Trajan's column was, in size and shape, a unique monument in Rome after its dedication in 113 A.D., and this is why it could very easily be distinguished and recognized on a coin, even without an inscription giving its name (fig. 20).⁸³ This monument soon became the most common and widely distributed "architectural type" on Trajan's coins, and apart from the careful delineation of several significant details, the representation could easily be connected to this particular column because of its characteristic structure: with the figures of eagles on top of the base, with the spiral-like decorated frieze, and with Trajan's colossal statue, which once stood atop.

Buildings and monuments of an architectural type which appears only rarely on coins could easily be depicted by giving them an individual appearance. If such a building or monument was particularly prominent and widely known, its identification did not require an inscription. Buildings

⁸³ RIC II Trajan 235, 238, 292–293, 307, 313, 356, 579, 600–603, 683; Elkins 2011, pp. 650–651, pl. 1.10; Elkins 2015b, p. 90, fig. 121; Färber 2016, pp. 57–64, figs. 46–65 (with a detailed comparison between Trajan's column and its representations on coins).

which were easy to recognize by their structural appearance, are, for example, the Circus Maximus on sestertii of Trajan⁸⁴ or the Colosseum on sestertii of Titus.⁸⁵ Nero's prominent Macellum Magnum, by contrast, was marked by the inscription **MAC(ellum) AVG(usti)** in nearly all representations on Neronian coins to ensure its identification.⁸⁶

The matter is different for those architectural structures that belong to a more common type of building or monument, such as altars.

From Augustan times onwards, several Roman coin types show altars of the same type, that were enclosed by walls with a double panelled door (figs. 17–19). Most of the altars on early Imperial Roman coins have no identifying features and are presented in such a vague manner that only the inscription says which altar this is. Considering the fact that several altars of this type existed in Rome, iconographic specification was difficult, and this might explain why these altars usually have an additional inscription.

Sometimes, however, these altars have an individual iconography. On the Neronian asses showing the **ARA PACIS**, the altar is not only fully named but also given the individual decoration of the model, with two sitting female figures in the upper panels referring to the representations of Tellus and Roma at the back side of the Ara Pacis (fig. 17).⁸⁷

A detailed iconography, however, is not always a reliable criterion for identification. The above-mentioned asses of Vespasian with the legend **PROVIDENT(iae)** show an altar of the same type, enclosed by walls with a double paneled door and some decoration atop (figs. 18–19).⁸⁸ On almost all of these asses, the altar has no distinctive iconography (fig. 18). There is, however, one variant where the façade has two sitting female figures in the upper panels (fig. 19),⁸⁹ and therefore the same decoration that the Ara Pacis has on the Neronian coins (fig. 17). The irritating procedure of giving an altar the decoration of another one can only be explained by the subordinate role that the altars have on these coins. As Sarah Cox has demonstrated, Vespasian's Ara Providentiae coin type celebrated Vespasian's dynastic foresight in designating his own sons as heirs, by adopting in type and legend

⁸⁴ RIC II Trajan 571; Elkins 2015b, pp. 86–87, fig. 111.

⁸⁵ RIC II 1² Titus 184–186; Elkins 2015b, pp. 80–82, figs. 94–96; Färber 2016, pp. 41–45, figs. 33–36. In the Haterii relief, too, the Colosseum (in contrast to the arch of Titus) did not need an inscription to be identified; cf. *supra* (with fig. 11).

⁸⁶ RIC I² Nero 109–111, 184–189, 373–374, 399–402; Elkins 2015b, p. 76, fig. 82.

⁸⁷ RIC I² Nero 418, 456–461, 526–531; Fuchs 1969, pp. 45–46, pl. 11.122; Elkins 2015b, p. 75, fig. 78; Färber 2016, pp. 14–19, figs. 8–22.

⁸⁸ RIC II 1² Vespasian 10, 313–317, 448, 489, 591–592, 630–631, 671, 729, 1166–1167, 1200–1201, 1234–1236, 1270–1272, 1280; Cox 2005, pp. 260–264, figs. 5, 8; Elkins 2011, pp. 646–647, pl. 1.3; Elkins 2015b, pp. 79–80, fig. 91; Färber 2016, pp. 135–136, figs. 125–127.

⁸⁹ BMCRE II, p. 132, no. 611, pl. 23.12; RIC II 1² Vespasian 317 (Rome); Färber 2016, pp. 135–136, fig. 125 (with further literature).

Tiberian bronze coins commemorating the consecration of Augustus.⁹⁰ The message was fully focused on Vespasian's virtue, which was much more important than the altar itself and its individual decoration.

With regard to the identification of architecture on coins, this particular case may demonstrate that an additional legend is always the most important identifier, and that even a detailed iconography does not necessarily mean a high degree of reality.

The same goes for temples, being the most frequent public building type on Roman coins which made it difficult to characterize a certain temple by giving it an individual appearance. In those cases where a temple is clearly identified by its iconography, there is a clear hierarchy of the identifying elements.

In representations of temples, such as the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus on the coins of Vespasian and Titus, the most important identifying feature is the representation of the – in this particular case three – cult statue/s, since they indicate which god/s the temple belongs to (figs. 2–3). By comparison, the architectural decoration, i.e. the pedimental and acroterial sculptures, as well as the number of front columns are secondary, and for this reason all these features can vary.

On the coins showing Caligula's sacrifice to **DIVO AVG(usto)** (fig. 15), the temple in the background is represented with a remarkable richness of details in the pedimental as well as in the acroterial sculptures. But the representation of the emperor and other figures in the foreground, concealing the *cella*, did not allow the cult statue to be shown, so that there was no space to insert the most distinctive feature of a temple. The presence of the legend **DIVO AVG(usto)**, squeezed into the small spaces on both sides of the figural scene, indicates that, despite the richness in architectural details, one obviously did not feel confident that the temple could be identified by the viewer without the help of an inscription.⁹¹

Even in cases where we would consider a temple easy to identify because of its unusual structure, a legend was often added. This applies to the famous round temple of **VESTA** on coins of Nero and Vespasian,⁹² or to the representations in three-quarter view of the Janus temple with closed doors

⁹⁰ Cox 2005, esp. p. 255 with fig. 1; cf. Elkins 2015b, pp. 79–80, fig. 91, pp. 114–115.

⁹¹ Fuchs 1969, pp. 114–115, had once again already come to a similar conclusion: “Ungeachtet aller Sorgfalt in der Wiedergabe charakteristischer Details konnte man mit einiger Zuversicht nicht voraussetzen, daß der hier dargestellte Tempel spontan als der des Divus Augustus erkannt würde”, and more generally: “Da, wo die Zuversicht in die eindeutige Artikulation des Wiedergegebenen nicht ausreicht, wird auf eine erklärende Beischrift zurückgegriffen”.

⁹² Nero: RIC I² Nero 61–62; Elkins 2015b, p. 76, fig. 81; Färber 2016, pp. 90–91, figs. 119–120. – Vespasian: RIC II I² Vespasian 492, 510, 515–516, 524, 530, 537, 548–550, 557–559, 599–601, 639–640, 647–648, 708; Elkins 2015b, p. 79, fig. 88; Färber 2016, pp. 94–95, figs. 129–132.

on Neronian coins where the emperor is praised with the legend **PACE P R TERRA MARIQ PARTA IANVM CLVSIT**.⁹³

All the more, inscriptions were also added to richly decorated but hardly distinguishable façades, such as the entrance to the **FORVM TRAIAN(i)**⁹⁴ or the front of the **BASILICA VLPIA**⁹⁵ on Trajanic coins.

How difficult the identification of even a spectacular building can be when an additional legend is missing, becomes evident from the famous and very common representations of a bridge on Trajan's coins.⁹⁶ The long and ongoing dispute on whether this depiction shows Trajan's famous bridge over the Danube or rather a bridge in Rome, will hardly ever lead to a definite answer. In this particular case, the scarce and purely iconographic evidence of the coins leads to the conclusion that the ancient viewers, if they were expected to identify the bridge, had some previous knowledge which is no longer available to us.

V. Architectural motifs and their different levels of reference

Architectural representations on Roman coins develop their informative potential at different levels of reference: at the iconographic level in their relation to other representations of architecture in coinage; at the programmatic level in their relation to and in combination with other elements on the same coin, including inscriptions; and at a third, outward-reaching level in their relation to an architectural prototype.

These levels of reference should be considered separately for reasons of methodological rigor. The emphasis is called for because controversial identifications often result from a confusion of categories. This problem applies not only to the traditional positivistic approach which takes the iconographic evidence primarily as evidence for the reconstruction of architectural prototypes, but also to some terms which are currently in use in numismatic research on architectural representations and are burdened with misleading connotations.

⁹³ RIC I² Nero 263–271, 283–291, 300–311, 323–328, etc.; Elkins 2015b, p. 74, fig. 77; Färber 2016, pp. 89–90, fig. 118.

⁹⁴ RIC II Trajan 255–257, 630, 654; Elkins 2015b, p. 91, fig. 123.

⁹⁵ RIC II Trajan 246–248, 616–618; Elkins 2015b, p. 91, fig. 122.

⁹⁶ RIC II Trajan 569–570; Kleiner 1991, pp. 187–188 with n. 18 (further literature), fig. 2; Elkins 2011, p. 651, pl. 1.11; Elkins 2015b, pp. 88–89, fig. 117, p. 115.



Fig. 20: Sestertius of Trajan, 112–117 A.D.
Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, 18204495

The iconographic level

Architectural representations should first be examined at a strictly iconographic level, by focusing on the architecture itself and comparing it with similar representations on other coins.

In this regard, the distinction between “specific” and “generic” representations has turned out to be helpful in order to define the degree to which a certain architecture is individualized by means of distinctive iconographical features. In applying these terms, however, it has to be taken into account that they are only of limited use.

The terms “specific” and “generic” should only be used in a comparative sense because the fluid transition between more and less individualized representations makes it difficult in many cases to decide which category the representation should be attributed to. It should further be taken into account that they are only suited to describing differences in the appearance of well-defined building types and therefore do not cover ambiguous architectural structures that cannot be typologically classified (figs. 6–7, 12–14). And finally, these terms should be used, in a purely descriptive way, only in reference to the architectural motif itself and not to the coin image as a whole.⁹⁷

Typology is an essential factor also with regard to the images’ iconographic specification. The way in which a certain building or monument could be individualized, depended heavily on the fact whether or not it belonged to an architectural type that was common on coins at the time. Exceptional buildings and monuments, such as Trajan’s column (fig. 20), Nero’s *Macellum Magnum*

⁹⁷ The same applies to expressions such as “generic composition” (Grunow Soboncinski 2006, p. 598) or “generic (coin) type” (Elkins 2011, pp. 649, 653; Elkins 2015b, p. 83) (both related to the sacrificial representations on Domitian’s *ludi saeculares* coins).

or the Colosseum, were distinguished already by their structural singularity on early Imperial Roman coinage. More common architectural types, such as altars or temples, had to be varied in their details to be individualized, allowing the makers to choose whether to depict the architecture in a more specific or a more generic way.

After defining to what extent a certain architecture is specified in its iconography, the next question is for what purpose it was given its particular design.

The programmatic level

In order to evaluate the meaning of an architectural representation, we have to ask in which way the architectural motif is combined with other elements on the same coin.

The most important hint to the significance and meaning of an architectural motif is provided by an accompanying inscription and its reference to the architecture.

The highest significance is attributed to a building or monument when an additional legend provides its name in the nominative case (e.g. **ARA PACIS**, fig. 17). The matter is slightly different when the legend mentions the name of a building or monument but does not have this purpose alone; this is the case, for example, when a building or monument is designated as the object of an activity of the emperor (e.g. **CAPIT(olium) RESTIT(uit)**, fig. 3). An even more indirect reference to the architecture can be found when the legend helps to identify a building or monument but, instead of providing its full name, praises one of the virtues of the emperor (e.g. **PROVIDENT(iae)**, figs. 18–19).

On other coins the inscription refers to the architecture only in an associative way, as in the case of representations of Trajan's column where the legend **SPQR OPTIMO PRINCIPI** does not mention the depicted monument but points to its significance as the result of an interaction process between a donor, the senate and the people of Rome, and an addressee, the emperor (fig. 20).

And then there are coins with inscriptions which do not refer to the architecture at all. This is the case when the legend is either exclusively focused on the activities of an emperor (figs. 4–7, 12–14), or simply mentions his title, as is the case with the representation of Hadrian addressing a group of citizens in front of a temple, accompanied by the legend **COS III** (fig. 16).

The second most important criterion in evaluating the meaning of an architectural representation is whether or not it is the main motif on the reverse.

As soon as an architectural structure appears in the background of a figural scene, it plays only a subordinate role within the composition. The marginal significance of background structures is clearly indicated by the fact that the

inscription usually does not even indirectly refer to the architecture (figs. 4–7, 12–14, 16; fig. 15 is an exception). This is also the reason why buildings or monuments in the background are usually not specified to a greater degree, being more “generic” than “specific” in their iconography.

In these cases we should not use the term “architectural coin type” to characterize the whole coin image.⁹⁸ As soon as an architecture, for example, appears in a sacrificial or an *adlocutio* scene, it is much more in line with the message of the coin to call it not “architectural” but “sacrificial” or “*adlocutio*” type instead.⁹⁹

The fundamental problem with the term “architectural coin type” is that the focus is exclusively on the architectural motifs, regardless of the fact that these are often only one among several elements within a larger composition, and often not the predominant one. This term is misleading because it makes us attribute the same value to all architectural motifs and ignore their diversity, not only in iconography but also in significance and meaning.

The problems of method become even more clearly apparent when “architectural coin types” are subdivided into “denotative” and “connotative” ones. “Denotative architectural types”, according to Elkins’ definition, are those that “celebrate the construction or reconstruction of monuments in Rome”, while “connotative” architectural types “illustrate monuments that had the potential to connote broader concepts to a wider audience.”¹⁰⁰ In applying this distinction one is thus pretending to be able to infer distinct messages from the mere presence of architectural motifs on coins, regardless of their respective significance and without taking into account the evidence provided by the coins themselves. The attempt, for example, to separate the sacrificial scenes on Domitian’s *ludi saeculares* coins into “denotative” and “connotative architectural types” faces the problem that none of the defining criteria apply to these images (figs. 4–7): neither the reference to a particular building or monument (all architectural motifs are secondary), nor the distinction between images which refer to specific events, and others which do not (all images, as the inscriptions explicitly say, refer to the same event), nor the differentiation between specific and broader messages (the addition of a bull or pig to a conventional libation scene hardly transforms a broader and easily intelligible concept into a specific and more sophisticated one). Accordingly, there is also no distinctive correlation between the specific meaning of an architectural representation and audience targeting. Trajan’s column, for example, is the most common and widely distributed “architectural

⁹⁸ For a definition of “architectural coin types” see Elkins 2015b, p. 11: “any coin that shows a building or large-scale monument, or some part thereof”.

⁹⁹ For the labelling of Domitian’s *ludi saeculares* coins see, for example, Elkins 2015b, p. 115: “Domitian’s most common architectural types are those that relate to the Ludi Saeculares”.

¹⁰⁰ Elkins 2011, p. 653.

type” on Trajanic coins,¹⁰¹ even though the erection of a monument in the capital is celebrated here (fig. 20).

In many cases it is not the architecture that emphasizes the core message of the coin, and even if a particular building or monument is the main motif on the reverse, the objective of the representation is almost never simply to document its existence. On most Imperial Roman coins the focus is on the achievements of the reigning emperor, in accordance with his portrait on the obverse, which indicates the wider conceptual context in which the representation on the reverse should be seen. All coin images, even if they show a particular building in Rome, are “connotative” by nature.

The prototype-related level

The third aspect of an architectural representation is its reference to a three-dimensional model. This aspect has traditionally been regarded as the most relevant one but it is also the most problematic aspect because it goes beyond the available evidence of the coins. The relation between an architectural depiction and its prototype refers to external factors and should therefore be treated separately from the other two levels of reference in order to avoid confusion.

The controversial debate on how accurately architectural representations on coins reflect the appearance of their models, is deeply rooted in the assumption that iconographic specification usually means a higher degree of realism and had the purpose to identify the building or monument.

Richness in detail, however, does not necessarily mean resemblance to reality. This is not only true for buildings which appear on coinage before they were completed (figs. 1, 3) but also for buildings and monuments that already existed.

Even a distinctive and very detailed iconography was not necessarily sufficient to identify a building, as the temple of Divus Augustus on Caligula’s coins exemplifies, given that it required an additional inscription despite all its elaborate detail (fig. 15). Iconographic specification can even be misleading, as is the case with those asses of Vespasian which depict the façade of the Ara Providentiae (fig. 19) with the same figural decoration as the Ara Pacis (fig. 17). Just as different altars could be given a similar appearance, the same altar could be represented in different ways (figs. 18, 19).

The lack of realism is all the more true for ambiguous architectural structures which resist identification because they do not fit into any typology (figs. 6–7, 12–14). An elaborate design may simply have served to give a

¹⁰¹ Elkins 2011, pp. 650–651, 653; Elkins 2015b, p. 115.

figural scene a decorative backdrop, in coinage as much as in other genres of Imperial Roman art (figs. 9, 10).

A more “generic” iconography of a building or monument, on the other hand, does not necessarily mean that identification, even if it was not essential, was not made possible. A hint could be given by an external identifier, as on Hadrian’s coins showing the emperor addressing a group of citizens in front of the very unspecific temple the localization of which was indicated by the distinctive decoration of the podium with *rostra* (fig. 16).

VI. Conclusion: The subordinate significance of architectural motifs on Roman coins

Buildings and monuments are a very interesting subject in Roman coinage but altogether not a very important one. They are very rare within the total stock of Roman coin images, and this alone justifies any warning not to overestimate their importance.¹⁰² Such warnings, however, should be taken seriously with even more consistency than has hitherto been the case. It is now widely agreed that architectural representations on coins reflect the appearance of their respective prototypes only in a very general way. Their significance, however, is not only overrated when we use them to reconstruct lost buildings or monuments, but already when we attribute an autonomous value to them by using their mere presence in order to define the overall message of a coin.

In contrast to what a common term such as “architectural coin types” may suggest, representations of architecture on Roman coins do not form a coherent group. There are no architectural coin types but only architectural motifs which could be contextualized in very different ways and acquire a very different significance.

Architectural motifs always play a subordinate role within the overall message of a coin. When we ask for their particular significance and meaning, the primary point of reference is not the external prototype but the immediate visual context they are embedded in on a particular coin. Any architectural motif on a reverse is part of a network of connotations, and its specific role within this framework is primarily defined by the way in which an accompanying inscription is referred to it. Architectural representations, as visual constructions, are a priori relatively independent from their model.

¹⁰² By analyzing coins of Vespasian, Domitian and Trajan from coin finds in Rome and Trier, Nathan Elkins (2011, p. 653, with table 2) has recently demonstrated that “architectural reverses average between only 2 % and 4 % of the total finds”, and emphasized that their paucity “highlights the dangers of placing undue importance on the role that architectural images played in the Roman Empire”; cf. Elkins 2015b, pp. 8, 116.

The subordinate role of architectural motifs helps us understand not only why some coin images show undefinable architectural structures, but also why one and the same building or monument could be represented in quite different ways, deviating from its model in structure, proportions and decoration. The conceptual integration of architectural motifs on coins also explains why so many buildings or monuments, even if they are clearly identified by their individual iconography, have an additional inscription. Such inscriptions were not primarily intended to ensure the identification of the building or monument depicted but to indicate the significance assigned to the architecture within the specific message of the coin.

Studies on architectural representations on Roman coins have traditionally been based on the premise that the intent behind them was usually to represent a particular building or monument, and that in those cases where an identification is difficult for us, the ancient viewer had some previous knowledge that is no longer accessible. This assumption may sometimes be justified but cannot be generalized. As soon as an architecture provides only a backdrop for a figural scene, its identity is usually not indicated, neither by an inscription nor by an iconographic specification.

Identification could hardly always have been expected from the viewer. When the identity of a building or monument was an essential part of the message of the coin, this intention was usually made explicit, in coinage as well as in other genres of Imperial Roman art. We should not force ourselves to identify each building on Roman coins, at least in those cases where we can be quite sure that an ancient Roman viewer would have had a similarly difficult time in doing so.

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Summary

This article tackles the question of why buildings and monuments on Roman coins are so often difficult to identify, despite their richness in details. This problem challenges us to ask if representations of buildings on monuments, as is generally assumed, always referred to a particular model that could be expected to be identified by the viewer. Focusing on Flavian coins on which architectural motifs appear in larger numbers, I shall demonstrate that there are not only buildings and monuments without any identifying features, but also ambiguous architectural structures that cannot even be typologically classified. A comparative look at Roman relief sculpture shows that this phenomenon is quite common, and that architectural representations in coinage comprise the same range of variations as are found in other genres of contemporary visual art. Unspecific buildings and indefinable architectural structures on Roman Imperial coins appear mainly in combination with a figural scene, providing only a decorative backdrop for the appearance of the emperor. It is argued that, in contrast to what the common term “architectural coin types” suggests, architectural motifs do not form a coherent group because they could have very different functions and are often only secondary within the overall message of the coin. I conclude that in those cases where the identification of a particular building or monument was an essential part of the message, this intention was usually made explicit, mostly by an additional legend.

Zusammenfassung

Darstellungen von Bauten und Monumenten auf römischen Münzen bereiten häufig Probleme bei der Identifizierung. Dies wirft die grundsätzliche Frage auf, ob sich solche Darstellungen wirklich stets auf ein bestimmtes gebautes Vorbild beziehen, dessen Identifizierbarkeit erwartet werden konnte. Dieser Frage wird im vorliegenden Beitrag anhand frühkaiserzeitlicher Reichsprägungen nachgegangen, unter Fokussierung auf die flavische Zeit, als Architekturdarstellungen eine prominentere Rolle auf Münzen spielten.

Ausgangspunkt ist der Umstand, dass in den Münzbildern nicht nur klar definierbare Bauwerke begegnen (Abb. 1–5), sondern mitunter auch singuläre architektonische Strukturen,

die sich einer typologischen Klassifizierung entziehen. Dies gilt etwa für einen Revers-Typ, der sich in der reichen Münzserie Domitians zur Feier der *ludi saeculares* in Rom 88 n. Chr. findet und eine dreiteilige Architekturfassade zeigt, deren Details in verwirrendem Maße variieren (Abb. 6–7). Gegen die vorgeschlagenen Identifizierungen mit einem oder mehreren Bauten oder mit der Fassade eines provisorischen Theaters ist einzuwenden, dass sich keine dieser Deutungen auf typologische Parallelen in der Münzprägung stützen kann.

Ähnliche Architekturprospekte finden sich indes in anderen Gattungen der frühkaiserzeitlichen Bildkunst, etwa in einigen sog. Campana-Reliefs (Abb. 8). Hier handelt es sich um eklektische Architekturkompositionen, die keinen bestimmten Bautyp vorstellen. Solche Phantasiearchitekturen begegnen auch in sog. lebensweltlichen Reliefdarstellungen (Abb. 9). Aber auch bei klassifizierbaren Bautypen hatte eine detailreiche Dekoration häufig nicht den Zweck, ein bestimmtes Gebäude erkennbar zu machen (Abb. 10). Wenn es auf die Identifizierbarkeit eines Baues oder Monumentes ankam, wurde dies in der Regel durch eine distinktive Ikonographie oder eine Beischrift verdeutlicht (Abb. 11). Unspezifische Bauwerke und realitätsferne Architekturkulissen treten zumeist in szenischen Reliefbildern auf, in denen sie lediglich eine prächtige Kulisse für die Handlung im Vordergrund abgeben.

Diese verschiedenartigen Einsatzmöglichkeiten an Architekturmotiven sind auch in der Münzprägung anzutreffen. Neben Gebäuden, die durch ihre Ikonographie und/oder eine Legende klar identifiziert sind (Abb. 1–3), gibt es Bauten, deren geringe oder fehlende Individualisierung nicht für eine Identifizierung ausreicht (Abb. 4–5), und eben auch unklassifizierbare Hintergrundarchitekturen (Abb. 6–7, 12–14).

Wenn definierbare Bautypen, wie insbesondere Tempel, lediglich als Kulisse für eine figurliche Szene fungieren, sind sie in der Regel weder ikonographisch noch durch eine Beischrift individualisiert (Abb. 4–5, 16; Abb. 15 ist eine Ausnahme). Mitunter liefert ein externes Bildelement einen Hinweis zur Lokalisierung (Abb. 16), doch häufig fehlt jeder Anhaltspunkt hierfür (Abb. 4–5). Der Grund für diese geringe Spezifizierung liegt darin, dass sich die Aussage des Münzbildes ganz auf die szenische Darstellung konzentriert und die Architektur nur eine marginale Rolle spielt.

Wenn ein Bau oder Monument das Hauptmotiv des Münzbildes darstellt, ist seine Identität zumeist durch eine zusätzliche Beischrift klargestellt (Abb. 3, 17–19). Diese Beischriften können sich in ganz verschiedener Weise auf die Architektur beziehen. Am deutlichsten im Fokus steht ein Bauwerk, wenn sein Name im Nominativ angegeben ist (Abb. 17). In den meisten Fällen nehmen die Beischriften nur in mehr oder weniger indirekter Weise auf die Architektur Bezug, und geht es nicht primär um den Bau oder das Monument selbst: etwa dann, wenn zum Bild eines Altares die Legende auf eine kaiserliche Tugend verweist und damit den Blick auf die Person des Kaisers lenkt (Abb. 18–19). Mit der untergeordneten Rolle von Architekturmotiven erklärt es sich etwa, dass verschiedene Altäre denselben figurlichen Schmuck aufweisen können (Abb. 17, 19) und derselbe Altar wiederum unterschiedlich dekoriert sein kann (Abb. 18–19).

In welcher Weise ein Bau oder Monument in seiner Ikonographie spezifiziert wurde, hing maßgeblich von seiner typologischen Zugehörigkeit ab. Spektakuläre und prominente Einzelbauten waren schon allein durch ihre Struktur individuell gekennzeichnet (Abb. 20). Bei geläufigen Bautypen wie Tempeln oder Altären hingegen konnte die Bezugnahme auf ein bestimmtes Vorbild nur durch eine Spezifizierung ihrer Dekoration kenntlich gemacht werden, und von dieser Möglichkeit konnte man Gebrauch machen oder auch nicht. Der Stellenwert

und die Bedeutung eines Architekturmotivs wurde primär über die Legende angezeigt und erst an zweiter Stelle über die Ikonographie.

Architekturdarstellungen in der römischen Münzprägung stellen keine kohärente Gruppe dar. Begriffe wie „architectural coin types“ sind zur Charakterisierung der Münzbilder ungeeignet, da sie den Architekturmotiven von vornherein eine zentrale Bedeutung für die Aussage zuschreiben und damit ihre Vielfalt in Gewichtung und Sinnggebung ausblenden. Bei den Rückseitenbildern römischer Münzen es gibt keine Architektur-Typen, sondern nur flexibel einsetzbare Architektur-Motive.

Irritationen bei der Deutung lassen sich vermeiden, wenn man bei der Analyse der Münzbilder die verschiedenen Bezugebenen, auf denen Architektur motive ihre Aussagekraft entfalten, voneinander trennt. Auf der ikonographischen Ebene geht es darum, die Architektur selbst über den Vergleich mit verwandten Motiven auf anderen Münzen zu beschreiben. Auf der programmatischen Ebene ist nach der Signifikanz des Architekturmotivs im Zusammenspiel mit allen anderen Elementen auf der betreffenden Münze zu fragen, um seine Bedeutung zu erhellen. Hiervon zu trennen ist die auf eine externe Bezugsgröße rekurrierende Frage nach der Bezugnahme auf ein bestimmtes dreidimensionales Vorbild; dieser Aspekt steht traditionell einseitig im Vordergrund des Interesses, sollte aber gegenüber der Frage nach den Aussageabsichten als nachrangig gelten.

Die oft nur sekundäre Rolle von Architekturmotiven auf den Münzen erklärt nicht nur das Vorkommen undefinierbarer Hintergrundstrukturen oder die ikonographische Variabilität bei der Darstellung ein und desselben Bauwerkes. Sie macht auch den bemerkenswerten Umstand verstehbar, dass vielfach auch solchen Bauten und Monumenten, die bereits durch ihre Ikonographie hinreichend identifiziert sind, zusätzlich noch eine Beischrift beigefügt ist: Solche Beischriften dienen nicht primär dazu, die Benennung zu gewährleisten, sondern dazu, die zentrale Aussage des Münzbildes zu artikulieren, und damit zeigen sie an, welche Bedeutung dem Architekturmotiv jeweils zuzumessen ist.

Bauten und Monumente sind zweifellos ein interessantes, aber insgesamt doch sehr sekundäres Sujet auf römischen Münzen. Sie sind nicht nur vergleichsweise selten, sondern vor allem spielt die Identität eines Baues oder Monumentes häufig nur eine marginale oder auch gar keine Rolle. Wenn eine Identifizierung beabsichtigt war, wurde dies in der Regel durch eine Beischrift und/oder individuelle Ikonographie explizit angezeigt.

