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The visual program behind the Roman architectural depictions on coins

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Architectural representations are rare, but they do occur on Roman coins. Today they are a valuable source of information on how buildings and sometimes even minor details looked like, which have since perished. Unfortunately, because of the nature of coins the interpretation of the depictions is occasionally quite difficult. This is further complicated by that the architectural representations, apart from the purely propagandistic purpose, also had various other meanings. Through some examples I will try to show in this paper, how these depictions can be used for the interpretation of the remains of actual buildings or for their reconstruction.

For quite a long time architectural depictions were regarded as a source of information on decayed buildings, and it took a longer time to realize that many of the images show interpretations of buildings instead of reproductions.[1] It also became apparent that most of the architectural depictions on Roman coins are either abstract or schematic, and N. Elkins was right in drawing comparison between the camp gate depictions and the map symbols on the Tabula Peutingeriana.[2] He also posed the question whether the iconography was first developed on coins, maps or mosaics.[3]

Even though the architectural images on coins serve decorative purposes, are parts of the background or in most of the cases are only intended as symbols, they still carry some information. The message they represented had to be clear for everyone, and the visual language must have been easy to understand for the contemporaries. Some of the symbols had much older origins or they were very abstract: the crude images of the Egyptian buildings on the bone game counters[4] were presumably as traditional and obsolete symbols as the images of Medieval kings on the Modern French playing cards.[5]

In our Modern Age, we have many symbols like this. Illustrations for children tales depict Premodern buildings, there are company logos displaying a sort of odd heraldry, and the traffic sings are showing steam engines at the railway crossings, although one can live a life without spotting any steam engines at all, at least in Europe. Although our knowledge is rather restricted, there are a few coin depictions where we are able to discover their origins or their wider context, and even their afterlife is of particular interest.

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1 See Ritter 2017, 101–104, especially 102.
2 Elkins 2015a, 293.
3 Elkins 2015a, 294.
4 E.g. at Alföldi-Rosenbaum 1979, 215–216 and 227.
5 Although some of them, especially the one mentioning Canopus, seem to refer to real buildings, see also McKenzie 1999, 185. and 186. Fig. 314.

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Polygonal cities

Among the city depictions on Roman coins, there is a type showing octagonal city walls[6] (*Fig. 1*), which has survived well into the coinage of the Middle Ages[7]. We have to note that the Madaba Map (*Fig. 2*) mosaic's cartographic depiction[8] and the mosaics from Gerasa[9] show very similar city depictions. In this context it seems to be very likely that the image of the polygonal city walls originates from antique cartography. The Peutinger Map has less complex symbols, with the exception of Ostia, which is depicted there the same way as the harbours on coin reverses[10] and some of the harbours on the Ammaedara (Haidra) mosaic.[11] This type of rendering also emerges in a very distant context like the view of Jerusalem in the Nurember Chronicle (*Fig. 3*), published in 1493. None of these depictions could be regarded otherwise as a commonplace symbol of a city.

Fig. 1 An example of hexagonal city walls: argenteus of Maximianus II. Galerius. (courtesy of Solidus Numismatik, Auktion 4/2014, Lot 279)

Fig. 2 Detail of the Madaba Map showing Jerusalem. (wikimedia.commons)

The round temple

In the coinage of Augustus, there are some interesting depictions of the temple of Mars Ultor (*Fig. 4*). As the temple itself has been partially preserved, one can compare its vestiges[12] and the depictions on the coins.[13] It seems to be a common practice in Roman coinage to show more or less imaginary details: although the depictions of the Capitoline temple appear to be less allusive, thorough studies have revealed their schematic nature.[14] It is assumed in both cases that the coins precede the actual construction of the temples.

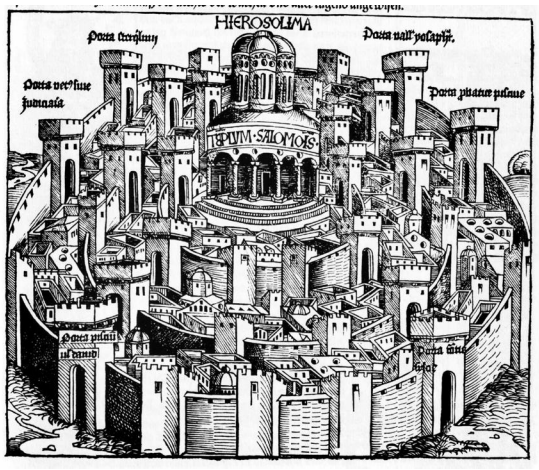

Fig. 3 Illustration of Jerusalem from the Nuremberg Chronicle (Pl. XVII, wikimedia commons)

6 E.g. Gordian III's coin from Marcianopolis. Elkins 2015, 161. Fig. 216.
7 Elkins 2015, 163–164.
8 Dunbabin 1999, 202–203, fig. 216. dated to approx. 560 BC.
9 McKenzie 2007, 252, fig. 420. and 421. dated 531 and 535–550 AD.
10 Elkins 2015, 91. Fig. 124.
11 Bejaoui 1997, 830. Fig. 5.
12 Gros 2002, 142. Fig. 154.
13 Elkins 2015, 61–63. See also considerations there whether the coin depictions intended to show a different temple.
14 Ritter 2017, 107–108.

For the Mars Ultor temple, the façade was substituted with a symbolic image: we see a round temple with war spoils or a statue inside, and the temple is named on the coin indicating that the primary aim of the depiction was to show the building.[15] The depiction variants of the temple differ from each other, but there can be little doubt that the message delivered to contemporary viewers was the final act of the Augustus' revenge, the deposition of the weapons or standards in the temple built for that very purpose. What is interesting here is the form of the temple, which is a tholos: a building type of Hellenistic origin, which had its Roman iconographic roots on the Second Style wall paintings.[16] Tholoi on Second Style wall paintings flanked by broken pediments show striking similarities to the Khasneh of Petra, and the small details (above all the types of the Corinthian capitals, which are specificly Alexandrian ones, instead of any general Normalkapitell) also refer to a Hellenistic origin, which ultimately had its roots in the architecture of Alexandria[17].

Fig. 4 The Temple of Mars Ultor, silver denarius. (courtesy of Numismatica Ars Classica NAC AG, Auktion 86/2015, lot 63.)

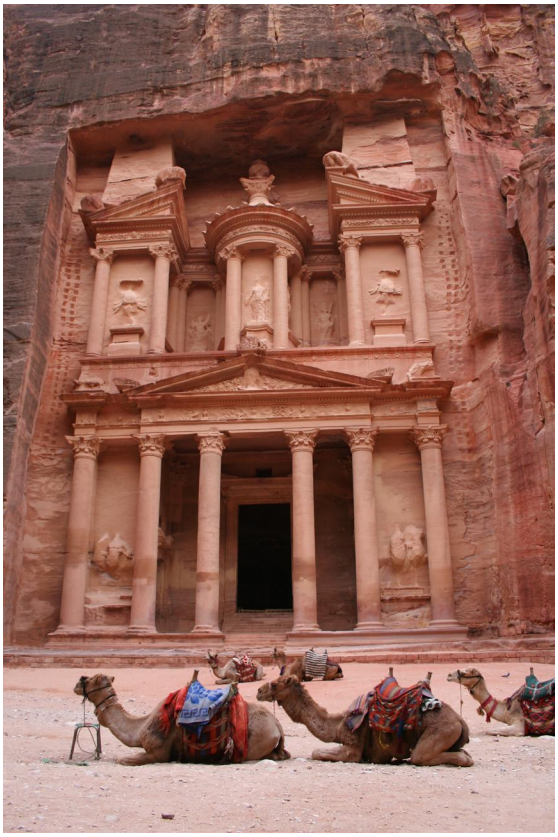

Fig. 5 The rock-cut grave known as Al-Khazneh in Petra (Jordan). (wikimedia commons)

The meaning of the tholos placed on the top of a complex building is somewhat obscure, but as the surviving buildings with such a façade are rock-cut graves, it is a possible interpretation that the façade-type represents a sort of heavenly palace or an eternal place[18]. If we accept the hypothesis that it could have represented a place where gods live, then such a façade could have represented perhaps the registers of another world.

The architectural form of the tholos was also adopted by the Roman temple architecture in the 2nd century BC, but it appears to be a quite exceptional design[19]. Showing a tholos as the Temple of Mars Ultor means that the architectural form of the tholos should have been associated with the meaning temple (house of a deity) or sacred place in Roman popular apprehension, perhaps in a more general form than a hexastyle temple.

15 Ritter 2017, 127.
16 See Elkins 2015, 43–44. and Fig. 43. showing the tholos from the Villa of Publius Fannius Sinistor at Boscoreale.
17 McKenzie 2007, 101–105.
18 McKenzie 2007, 112. See also Borbein 1975.
19 Gros 2002, 129.

The depiction of the tholos has survived as far as the Middle Ages, only its meaning has been slightly altered: instead of representing a sacred building it became the symbol of Paradise[20]. In the Godescalc Evangelistary it is presented as the Fountain of Life[21].

Fig. 6 The city gates of Augusta Emerita. (Courtesy of Tauler & Fau Subastas, Auction 4 Lot 28 of 2017)

Fig. 7 The Porta Venere in Spello, Italy. (author's photo)

Fig. 8 The gate of the Aquincum legionary fortress at the present-day Kórház u. (Budapest, Hungary) (author's foto and plan after the archives of the Budapest History Museum)

Camp or city gates

Similar to the polygonal cities, the image of the city gates of Augusta Emerita was presumably also meant to represent the city as a whole (*Fig. 6*). The depiction appears on provincial coins of Augustus and Tiberius.[22] The depiction is nevertheless very schematic, but one can still recognize the essential features of the gate: two flanking towers, arched openings and crenelated parapets. The name of the colonia is written on the façade. The modern classification of the city gates relies mostly on their function derived from their floor-plan, for the Romans, who have approached and seen these gates, it was much more important how they looked like as buildings.

The appearance of the gate on these Early Imperial coins corresponds to one of the contemporary architectural types, which is represented by the Porta Venere in Spello (*Fig. 7*) or the gates of Verona and Torino. The coin depictions do not reveal if the gates were double. This gate type with simple decoration and a utilitarian layout has also found its way into the military architecture, even the 2nd-3rd century AD eastern gate of Aquincum's legionary fortress in Pannonia had a similar floor-plan, and as far as we can reconstruct it, it had a similar appearance as well (*Fig. 9*). There is also a surviving clay model of this gate type from the Pannonian Intercisa fortress, dated to the same time period (*Fig. 8*). The model bears a *tabula ansata*, in a similar way as the coin depictions of

20 Various examples are presented by McKenzie 2007, 362–370, including medieval manuscripts and the mosaics of the Great Mosque in Damascus.

21 Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits, NAL 1203. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6000718s

22 Elkins 2015b, 59–60.

Augusta Emerita. The clay gate model's inscription however, is not the name of the town but the name of the potter, who has later (or earlier) resided near the civil town of Aquincum, and it was assumed that he has modelled the gate after a real one he had perhaps seen each day[23]. Even the Porta Nigra in Trier was built as a city gate with flanking towers and arched openings, which means that the architectural type represented on the coin reverses did not perish in the Late Roman period (*Fig. 10*).

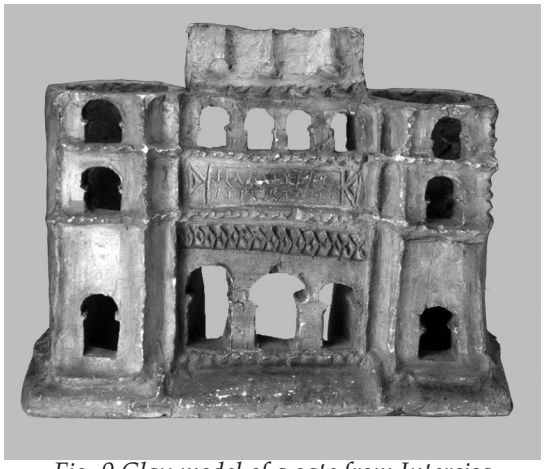

Fig. 9 Clay model of a gate from Intercisa (present-day Dunaújváros, Hungary)

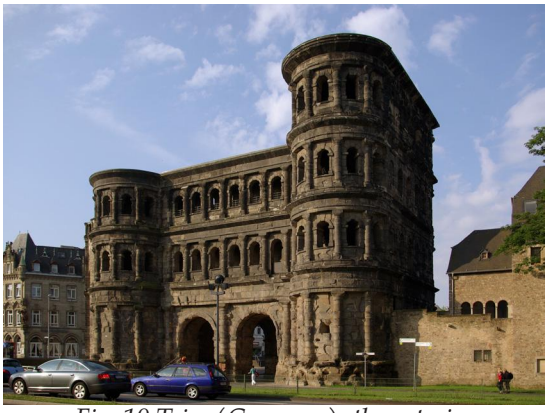

Fig. 10 Trier (Germany), the exterior side of the Porta Nigra.

However, the gates on the late Roman coins show a different architectural type (*Fig. 11*), which is often referred to as camp gate or watchtower.[24] It can be assumed that the form of the gate was altered according to the changes in Roman warfare or architecture, which is a convenient explanation for the changes of the gates' public image. There is also another logical explanation for the change that the late Roman coins show watchtowers instead of large-scale defensive structures[25]. The latter hypothesis was based on the details showing a number of spherical objects over the gate which could be interpreted as turrets or beacons. In light of what we have seen above it would be rather surprising if such a precise detail would appear on a Roman coin's reverse depictions, and Failmezger's theory on the beacons and their use seems to be very hypothetic. If the identification of the depicted buildings as watchtowers would be correct, then the message behind the inscription VICTORIAE SARMATIAE would have referred to the defensive line of the Ripa Sarmatica, a chain of fortresses along the Danube at the Pannonian frontier.

Fig. 11 Coin showing the camp gate type. (courtesy of the Coin Cabinet of the Eötvös Loránd University)

Concerning the depicted buildings, we have to note that the first plates on Trajan's column show a number of watchtowers with gabled and hipped roofs.[26] The walls of these watchtowers are made of stone blocks, apparently to emphasize their Roman origin and puissance.[27] Signals are being given with long torches projecting out from the openings on the second floor, and these watchtowers have defensive fences and battlements, but no visible gates, contrary to the coin depictions. There is little in common between the watchtowers on Trajan's column and the coin depictions. One might wonder how

23 Alföldi et al. 1957, 90–91, Taf. XXIV/1.
24 This type appeared first under the Tetrarchs and it was in use throughout the 4th century AD. Elkins 2015, 124–130.
25 Failmezger 2002,108.
26 Lehmann-Hartleben 1896, pl. I–II.
27 For a detailed study see Wolfram-Thill 2010.

Roman warfare has changed in the period between Trajan and Diocletian (not to mention his successors who issued coins showing similar structures), but as we have seen beforehand, the nature of coin depictions is quite far from being documentary. The city or camp gate is only a symbol, the same way as we have seen in the case of the tholos.

There is a golden medallion showing the capture of London by Constantius I on its reverse (*Fig. 12*).[28] The city gate which is depicted there in a sort of axonometry has the same articulated stone block (or opus quadratum) wall with two flanking structures (which are obviously towers), as the late Roman bronze coins (*Fig. 8*). As it was already demonstrated, the kneeling person in front of the gate, the galley and the riding emperor are commonplace motifs.[29] This building in the background, made of stone blocks, must have been the symbol of a city gate (its form bears some resemblance to the Porta Nigra, but the tower on the coin has no windows), and a contemporary viewer could have easily understood the message of the depiction. The form of the city gate here is close to the type that first appeared on the coins of Diocletian. The gate itself is an important feature on the coin depictions, and it has little in common with the normal functions of a watchtower. Besides the fortification of the frontiers, it was also a common practice to build new fortification walls for the cities, often using crude stone blocks or gravestones and mouldings dismantled from older buildings. Late Roman fortifications were often built around a resized city perimeter as the number of the population began to decline. The coin depictions have to be regarded as symbols of security and the reorganization of the Empire, and it is very likely that they did not represent any specific building type.

Fig. 12 The Arras medallion, showing Constantius Chlorus approaching the city of Londinium. (*wikipedia commons*)

The Barbarian hut and its origins in Roman art

Although the architectural depictions on coins were meticulously studied in the past, there was little attention given to the Barbarian huts on the reverses of the Late Roman FEL TEMP REPARATIO coins (*Fig. 13*).[30] As a source of architectural information of vernacular or Barbarian buildings, these coin reverses seem to have limited use.[31] They appear to be

28 The so-called Arras Medallion, part of the Beaurains Treasure, is kept in the British Museum. The coins of the hoard are published by Bastien-Metzger 1977.

29 Tybout 1980, 59.

30 From a numismatic point of view, it would be very interesting to see the combinations of the mint marks, obverse types, hut types and the depicted plants: but such a research appears to be extremely time consuming. So far, we know about 13 mints which issued coins with these hut depictions, there are 3 distinct hut types (Timár 2015, 193) and at least 4 different plant types. Together with the small differences on the obverses, one can assume that the number of the possible combinations would go well into the range of many dozens. The possible benefit of such an analysis would be an established chronology of the distribution of the reverse types, which ultimately would lead to answering the question whether or not the die templates for the different hut types were created at one particular mint and distributed from there all over the Empire.

31 Timár 2015, 198.

commonplace depictions of subjects already shown on the columns of Trajan and Marcus.[32] The image of a soldier pulling or leading a Barbarian was also already featured on Roman coins before.[33] The Barbarian huts are also reutilized images, as the very same building can be observed on a relief showing a shepherd milking a goat in the Museo della Civiltá Romana in Rome.[34]

Fig.13 Hut depiction on a FEL TEMP REPARATIO coin. (inv. nr: ÉT Delh. 1878b, courtesy of the Hungarian National Museum's Department for Coins and Medals)

We have to go back here to the Early Imperial game counters with crude depictions of vernacular buildings. These bone tokens with the reverse inscription Eurylochou show a very simplified image of a domed Egyptian hut (which were first erroneously interpreted as baskets viewed upside down). This domed Egyptian hut also appears on the Palestrina Mosaic.[35] The crude form of the building on the game counters is obviously a symbol: either of a building or the activity which is linked to it, similarly like in the board games of our Modern Age where e.g. the silhouette of a tall chimney and a shed roof refers to a factory (adapted also to indicate the date of manufacture on the package of some commercial products). The Barbarians and their huts on the coins must have been such simple symbols as well.

Such a visualization, which uses the same recurring, commonplace and imprecise images for similar events appears odd to us, but seems to be common practice. Even in the time of the Bayeux Tapestry or the Nuremberg Chronicle, or perhaps as late as in Colonel Barnum's travelling shows of the late 19th century, images have only accompanied the flow of the story and a precise or detailed visualization was not necessary. Perhaps a more relevant example is attested by the Christian depictions of Stations of the Cross, where there are hardly any common features between depictions of the last 500 years. Even the cross or the person of Jesus has numerous visual variants.

If we extend the theory of N. Elkins that the particular coin depictions have to be regarded in a wider context, we can assume that the coins, which were issued at the same time, might have accompanied one particular element of imperial propaganda.[36] Although there are five depiction types of the FEL TEMP REPARATIO coins, it seems to be rather a modern idea to group them according to their reverse inscription. In reality, FEL TEMP REPARATIO coins were circulating along with series like GLORIA ROMANORVM or FELICITAS REIPVBLICE.[37] Although these expressions appear to be imperial mottos for a given period or the incipits of imperial decrees, they are, in fact repetitive. Most of them can be associated with various historical events[38], although the inscriptions do not reflect the nature of those events.[39] The high number of recurrent inscriptions combined with the schematic depictions underlines the

32 Tybout 1980, 58
33 E.g. on a gold coin of Magnentius. Gnecchi 1912, Tav. 14/1–2.
34 https://www.gettyimages.ca/detail/photo/roman-civilization-relief-portraying-high-res-stock-photography/103023439
35 Meyboom 1999, 30; see the respective footnotes, Alfoldi-Rosenbaum 1976, 215–216.
36 Elkins 2015, 2–4 and 7–8.
37 Examples taken from Failmezger 2002, 42–43
38 See Failmezger 2002, 1–15.
39 A case study is the identification of the historical event behind the FEL TEMP REPARATIO coins: Weiser 1987, 167–168).

inexpressive character of Roman coinage, and in this context it seems rather unproductive to link architectural reverse depictions to specific building types. As it was demonstrated above, the architectural depictions are very vague.

But, nevertheless, it is still possible that there was some indirect meaning behind the combinations of inscriptions and depictions. At this point we must go back to the golden medallion of Constantius which appears to have a sort of narrative. The complex image shown there is perhaps the recapitulative representation of a story, which could have been published separately, on perhaps three coins of lower denominations. The low value coins in late Roman bronze coinage must have conveyed messages for the Roman Empire's whole population, but these were presumably very simple, adjusted to the capacities and education of the masses.[40]

40 Elkins 2015, 167–170.

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