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# Contents

Foreword / Előszó	7
Abbreviations of journals and periodicals / Rövidítésjegyzék	9
TORBÁGYI Melinda Háború és a kelta nagyezüstverés a Kárpát-medence térségében	11
Tamás FEHÉR Roman Coins from the Municipium of Brigetio	22
A. VIDA István Viminacium hátlapos aprópénz-utánzatok	29
JUHÁSZ Lajos Egy újrafelfedezett éremkincs Aquincum polgárvárosából	51
Lőrinc TIM ÁR City gate or watchtower? Turret or signal beacon? An obscure detail on some Late Roman coins.	65
HOP PÁL Krisztina Római pénzek Jáváról	75
BARNA Ferenc Adalékok a késő császárkor római irodalmának pénzneveihez Einige Beiträge zu den Münznamen in der römischen Literatur der späten Kaiserzeit	87 94

# City gate or watchtower? Turret or signal beacon? An obscure detail on some Late Roman coins.

LÓRINC TIMÁR\*

*The camp gate images on Late Roman bronze coins are often regarded as depictions of fortresses along the empire's frontier, and much effort was made to connect the date of their issue to historical events. It has already been debated whether they refer to any specific fortress or they simply signify a generic camp, but it is generally accepted that they were intended to deliver propagandistic messages to contemporaries. The reverse legends were illustrated with architectural images, and in this aspect it is important to study the details (notably the battlements) that can alter the meaning of those messages.*

Perhaps the most common architectural depiction on Late Roman bronze coin reverses is the so-called "camp gate": a rectangular façade with varying details.<sup>1</sup> Usually, an arched opening is depicted on a wall made of stone blocks, and there is also a number of small objects or structures over the masonry. Beyond these general features, there are many differences in the details. Sometimes the door-leaves are also shown, though the arch over the opening is universally unmarked. The ashlar walls have different textures, in some cases even rudimentary cornices are shown. What is of peculiar interest, is the rendering of those structures or objects above the wall, which are often referred to by collectors colloquially as "barbecue kettles" (Fig. 1). They are usually identified as turrets, but compared to the earlier depictions, e.g. the city gates of Augusta Emerita on Augustan coins they look quite different from those.<sup>2</sup> According to the theory of V. Failmezger, they are rather signal beacons intended to transmit short messages, therefore, the depicted buildings are to be identified as watchtowers which were deployed along the frontiers of the Empire. He has also published proposed code tables for the signals.<sup>3</sup> Although his hypothesis seems to be logical, and lately it has been profoundly discussed how such a signaling could have functioned, it still lacks the comparison with depictions in Roman art.<sup>4</sup> In the present paper we will attempt to review the identification of these objects.



*Fig. 1: Bronze coin of Constantine I showing a typical camp gate depiction with two turrets or beacons. (Coin Cabinet of the Institute for Archaeological Sciences, Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest, inv.: O.4222)*

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1 The identification of these depictions as camp gate has a long history. ELKINS 2013, 288 and note 16. Attempts were also made to find the links between the issue of these reverse types, historical events and changes in the imperial propaganda R. ALFÖLDI 1955.

2 TIMÁR 2019, 76–78.

3 FAILMEZGER 2002, 108.

4 DAHM 2004.



Fig. 2. Watchtowers on Trajan's Column.  
(CICHORIUS 1896, scene 5-6)

between the rendering of the buildings on the column and the coins is the texture of the walls, where the stone blocks are emphasized. As the imagery on both the Column of Trajan and the Column of Marcus place a special highlight on the contrast between Roman and Barbarian buildings<sup>6</sup>, we are far from wrong by assuming that one of the principal messages of this depiction was the visualization of one of the Roman civilization's symbols. The watchtowers there have a pyramid roof, which is covered with a roofing material that is marked with slant stripes and features a rectangular tip. It has to be noted that the signaling device shown here is a burning torch (similar to the depiction on the Pharos Beaker from Begram<sup>7</sup>).

### The tetrarchic archetype with domed turrets

The earliest coins with "camp gate" or watchtower depictions were struck from the reign of Diocletian.<sup>8</sup> There are two types of depictions: one shows the gate with the building frontally and the other depicts the building in a sort of axonometric projection. The latter version is



Fig. 3. Aureus of Maximianus Herculeus, building in axonometric projection with five turrets and domes(?).  
(Courtesy of Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 24, Lot 244, 05.12.2002)

A number of watchtowers are shown on Trajan's Column. Even though they originate from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, it has already been proven that some scenes from the Column of Marcus found their way to the coin reverses of the 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>5</sup>, thus it would not be very surprising if we could find other similarities within a longer time period of the Roman Imperial imagery. The watchtowers on Trajan's Column are, however, different from the buildings on the discussed Late Roman coin reverses (Fig. 2). The only similarity

more informative, as even the building's floor-plan can be reconstructed (Fig. 3). The structures over the wall appear to be turrets with domed roofs, depicted in the manner of the tholoi seen on Augustan coins.<sup>9</sup> Because of the difference between the depictions of tower roofs and domes is quite apparent in Roman art (Fig. 4), there can be little doubt that the turrets are covered with domes. We have to note that the stripes representing the supports of the domed roofs are vertical and not slant, therefore, they should be interpreted as columns or joints between stone blocks.

5 E.g. in the case of the FEL TEMP REPARATIO series depicting a Barbarian hut and the Arras medallion: TYBOUT 1980, 59; WEISER 1987. See also TIMÁR 2019a, 78–80.

6 TIMÁR 2019b, 208–209. See also WOLFRAM THIL 2010.

7 <https://ackuimages.photoshelter.com/image/I00001wg7VtH5Zh4> (last visited 23.02.2020)

8 ELKINS 2015, 124.

9 ELKINS 2015, 61–63.

The building shown on the reverse type in axonometry has five turrets, one of which is in the middle. Their dome is plain, with small spheres on their tops. Behind the central turret there are a few small items visible: a pair of garlands (possibly baldachins) and small turrets or tripods. The baldachins seem to appear in connection with the person of the emperor in Roman imagery as early as under Antoninus Pius.<sup>10</sup> The precursor of the “camp gate” type shows four tetrarchs sacrificing over a tripod in front of a city, which can thus be interpreted as an imperial capital.<sup>11</sup>

Two other reverse types show four domes (Fig. 5 and 6), and one set of those domes appears to be fluted. As real fluted domes were made of opus caementicium and due to structural problems it is very unlikely that such constructions could have been placed on the top of turrets, we can assume that the curved lines represent the joints of sheet metal roofing, if they are intended to represent structural details at all. These depictions also show open doors or gates, which have an important role in Roman imagery (note that the doors of the contemporary tomb type coin reverses open inwards<sup>12</sup>, similar to the surviving bronze doors of the Pantheon and Temple of Romulus). The rendering of the door-leaves is rather awkward because they are rectangular and are much broader than the door’s opening.

A possible graphic reconstruction of the building with five domed turrets is shown in a sketch (Fig. 7). The middle turret can be interpreted as a tholos in the middle of the courtyard because it seemed to be more reasonable than a single turret over the gate, but it is also not unlikely that the coin depiction has no link to any exact building type that has existed.<sup>13</sup> Such a number of domes appeared on baths which would make no sense here in such a martial context (note the coin inscriptions related to Victory and Virtus), but a reference to a sanctuary or monument or even an imperial palace would be less surprising. It has also to be kept in mind that domes are least suitable for

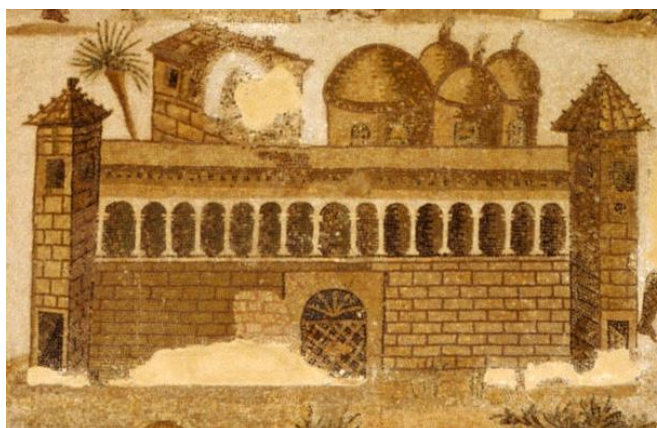


Fig. 4. The main building on the mosaic of *Dominus Iulius' Estate, Carthage*. Note the domes in the background (three of them are emitting fumes as they belong to the baths) and the flanking towers' roofs. (wikipedia.commons)



Fig. 5. *Argenteus* of Diocletian, building in frontal projection with four turrets and fluted domes(?). (Courtesy of Stack's Bowers Galleries, August 2013 Chicago ANA Auction, lot 11161, 13.08.2013)



Fig. 6. *Argenteus* of Diocletian, building in frontal projection with four turrets and plain domes(?). (Courtesy of Ira & Larry Goldberg Coins & Collectibles, auction 32/ lot 243, 08.01.2014. <https://www.acsearch.info/search.html?id=1826692>)

10 ELKINS 2013, 295.

11 ELKINS 2013, 286.

12 ELKINS 2015, 126. fig. 177.

13 See ELKINS 2015, 133–135, also for other considerations.

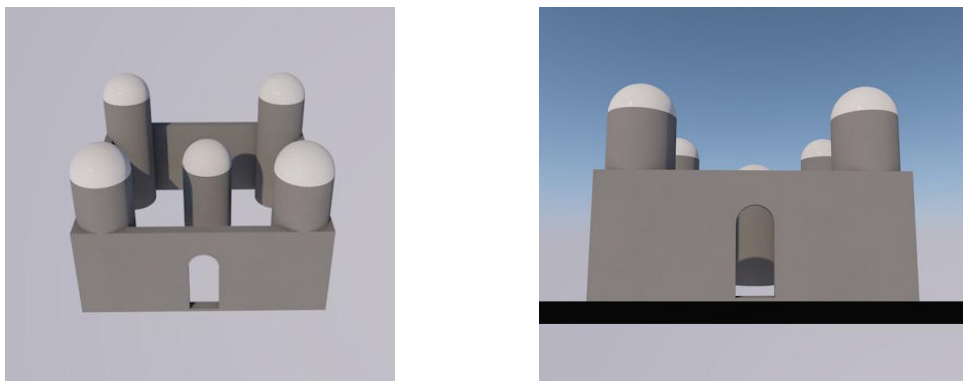


Fig. 7. Sketch showing a possible form of the building depicted on the coin of Maximianus Herculius (Fig. 4) from bird's eye view and from the eye level.

defensive architecture and special knowledge was needed for their construction. The arrangement of the turrets, four at the corners and one in the middle recalls the description of Porsenna's grave in Clusium, as described by Varro and cited by Pliny the Elder (HN 36, 91-93), and it has to be noted that a few funerary monuments have a somewhat similar layout.<sup>14</sup> Fig. 7. also shows the same building as viewed from the ground, and the way the corner turrets can be seen in perspective is more or less similar to the turrets shown on the depictions in Fig. 5 and 6.

Later issues of these tetrarchic reverse types by Constantine I seem to show the same building, but the depictions on silver coins are heavily simplified (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. *Argentus* of Constantine I Caesar, showing the same building as Maximianus's aureus (fig.3). (Courtesy of Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 100, Lot 94, 29.05.2017. <https://www.acsearch.info/search.html?id=3887620>)



Fig. 9. Bronze coin of Valens showing a camp gate. Courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, LLC, [www.cngcoins.com](http://www.cngcoins.com), auction: Mail Bid Sale 63/2003, lot 1550.

### Flanking towers with conical roofs

The next type to be discussed here is the depiction with two flanking towers and conical roofs (Fig. 9). It is to be noted that the roof's tip is marked with a small sphere. As it is the frontal view of a façade, the building cannot be fully reconstructed, but its features have parallels among the city or camp gates, and the opinion that they resemble a Late Roman fortress (notably the *burgus*-type)<sup>15</sup> cannot be considered totally wrong, even though the simplicity of the depiction makes it impossible to link it to any of the excavated fortress types which also have their own architectural chronology.<sup>16</sup>

An attempt to reconstruct the volume of the building with flanking towers is shown in Fig. 10. It has to be noted that according to the archaeological evidence, the smallest watchtowers did not have corner turrets or towers, which were the features of larger fortifications. There was a type among the large Late Roman fortresses with fan-shaped corner towers dated to the reign of

14 GROS 2001, 411.

15 ELKINS 2015, 135; FAILMEZGER 2002, 108.

16 E.g. for Pannonia see VISY 2003, 164–168.



Constantius II<sup>17</sup>, but such façade details also appear on city walls, inland fortresses, and even in the architecture of villae, as it can be seen in Fig. 3. The latter example is important because it bears some resemblance to the sea façade of Diocletian's palace in Split, which also possessed a monumental ashlar wall with side towers.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the façade-type shown on these coin reverses seems to be a universal attribute of the administrative and military centres of power.

The building-type with the flanking towers also appears on the Arras medallion (Fig. 11). As this coin reverse has been composed of almost commonplace images<sup>19</sup>, there can be little doubt that the city gate in the background would be anything else than a symbolic representation of Londinium's fortification. The Late Roman *Notitia Dignitatum's* copy in Munich<sup>20</sup> shows symbolic buildings in the same manner (Fig. 12). Thus, this building-type appears to be a symbolic representative of a city, town or an important fortification.<sup>21</sup> What is of particular interest here, is the rendering of the tower roofings. Both the Arras medallion and the *Notitia's* Paris manuscript<sup>22</sup> (Fig. 13) show conical roofs with spheres on their tips. The roofing

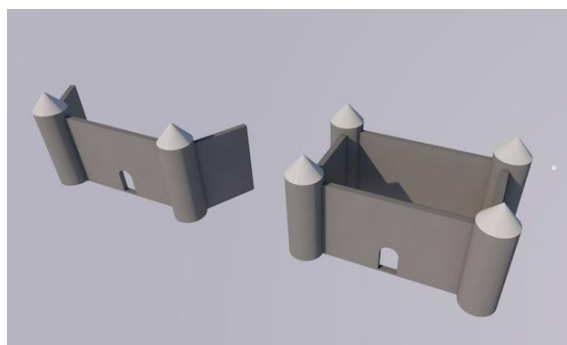


Fig. 10. Possible interpretations of the building shown on the coin in Fig. 8. The left one is an entrance of a larger complex while the right is a fortress.



Fig. 11. The Arras medallion showing Constantius Chlorus approaching the city of Londinium. (wikipedia.commons)

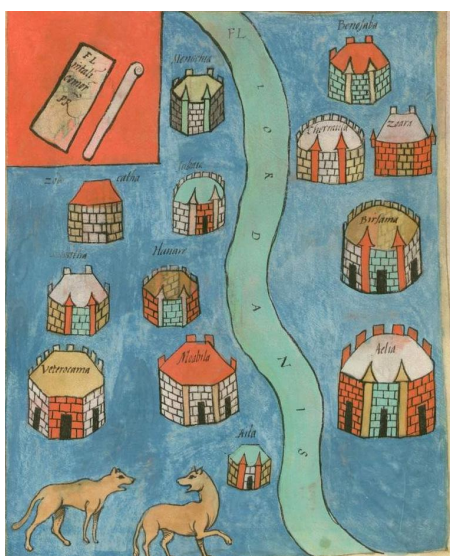


Fig. 12. Page from the Munich copy of the *Notitia Dignitatum*, showing the insigne of the Dux Palaestinae. Note the similarity between Aelia and the coin reverse in Fig. 8. (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, München, BSB-Hss Clm 10291, p. 193r, [http://daten.digital-sammlungen.de/bsb00005863/image\\_389](http://daten.digital-sammlungen.de/bsb00005863/image_389))

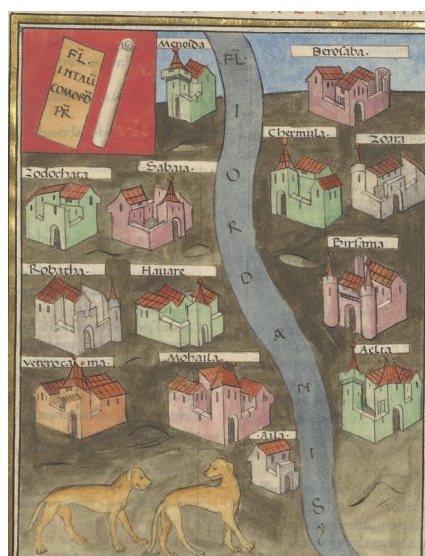


Fig. 13. Page from the Paris copy of the *Notitia Dignitatum*, showing the insigne of the Dux Palaestinae. Note the Medieval character of the buildings, and the rendering of Birsama, which is the only one with arched gate and flanking towers, similar to the Munich copy and the coin reverse in Fig. 8. Bibliothèque nationale de France. (Département des Manuscrits. Latin 9661, p. 94v. Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France)

17 VISY 2003, 90–92.

18 WARD-PERKINS 1994, 454–457.

19 TYBOUT 1980, 59.

20 This copy's illustration is regarded as the most faithful to the 9<sup>th</sup> century Codex Spirensis, which is believed to be a direct copy of the Roman original. See BERGER 1981, 1–13.

21 See also BERGER 1981, 161–162.

22 See the considerations about the questions of its accuracy below.



Fig. 14: The city of Bethlehem on the triumphal arch of the Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. Note the roofing of the towers. (wikimedia.commons)



Fig. 15: Bronze coins of Constantine I and Diocletian showing a typical simplified "camp gate" depiction. (Coin Cabinet of the Institute for Archaeological Sciences, Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest, Inv.: O.4401 and O.3583)

script<sup>26</sup>) have vertical legs unlike the modern camera or surveyors' tripod's spread legs.

The second reason is the visual similarity to the conical roof depictions in Roman art which were discussed here. Fig. 16. shows a comparison of roof depictions besides a typical Late Roman coin. The Late Roman coin reverse seems to represent rather a simplified version of the standardized conical roof depiction instead of any signaling device.



Fig. 16: Comparison of the conical roofs depicted on the Arras medallion, the mosaic of Santa Maria Maggiore, a Late Roman coin with simplified "camp gate" depiction and the Paris manuscript of the Notitia Dignitatum.

23 KRAUS 1967, 272.

24 ELKINS 2015, 127.

25 See footnote 1. This interpretation is also linked to the buildings' identification as watchtowers.

26 <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6000542r/f247.item> (last visited 19.02.2020)

material is indicated with slant stripes. On the mosaic of the triumphal arch of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome (Fig. 14), dated to 430-440 AD<sup>23</sup>, there are two cities depicted on the arch's springers, and the conical roofs are shown in a similar manner: spheres are placed on the tips with slant lines below, but there are also horizontal lines indicating tegula roofing.

### The problematic type: "camp gate" with turrets or beacons

The last reverse type to be discussed here, introduced under the reign of Constantine I<sup>24</sup>, is the most problematic one, although it is possibly only a derivative of the contemporary argenteus reverse shown in Fig. 8. The depiction is very simple: a rectangular wall with an empty opening without any protruding towers (Fig. 15). On the top of the wall two to four spherical objects are shown, and as we have already mentioned beforehand, these are the structures which were interpreted as turrets or beacons.<sup>25</sup>

There are two arguments against the identification of these structures as beacons. The first is the shape itself. Even though the form of those structures is close to the modern barbecue kettles, such items did not seem to have existed in Antiquity. Tripods shown on coins (and also in the Notitia Dignitatum manuscripts, e.g. see page 122r of the Paris manu-

A short remark must be made on the roof depictions shown in the Paris manuscript of the *Notitia Dignitatum* (it also applies to the related copies, e.g. the Bodleian manuscript<sup>27</sup>). While the depictions in general are doubtlessly further from the Roman customs, some small details (e.g. the colours) seem to be more faithful to the original.<sup>28</sup> The rendering of the Roman forts as Medieval mansions was clearly due to the effort of the copyist, but the depiction of the conical roofs perhaps retained some of the original Roman style (see Fig. 16). Although it cannot be proven, it is imaginable though that the *Notitia's* 5th century Roman edition had hexagonal forts in the manner of the Munich manuscript, and these forts had conical roof as depicted in the Paris manuscript.

This simple “camp gate” depiction was revived for a short time at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>29</sup> While the coins of Theodosius and Valentinian III follow the minimalist traditions of the Constantine dynasty's coins, the reverses of Gratian<sup>30</sup> and Flavius Victor's bronzes depict full-size turrets with conical roofs. The rendering of the roofing is, however, quite unsophisticated (Fig. 17).



Fig. 17: Bronze coin of Flavius Victor showing a camp gate. (Courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, LLC, [www.cngcoins.com](http://www.cngcoins.com), Electronic Auction 95/2004, lot 174)

## Conclusion

What conclusion can be drawn from these considerations? The first statement we can risk is that the coin reverses show two building types. The early examples, high denomination gold and silver coins struck in the times of the Tetrarchy seem to depict a monument or perhaps an imperial palace. The reverse legends (*VICTORIA SARMATICAE*, *VIRTVS MILITVM*, *PROVIDENTIA AVGG*, etc.<sup>31</sup>) refer to active war efforts.

Bronze coins of the Constantinian and Valentinian dynasties show the generic image of a fortification, which could be interpreted as a city wall, a fortress, even a camp gate, or simply as a symbol of Rome's power and civilization. The reverse legends of these coins (mentioning *FIDES MILITVM*, *PROVIDENTIA AVGG* or *CAESS*, *SECVRITAS REIPVBLICAE*, *GLORIA ROMANORVM* etc.) seem to refer to passive defensive measures, perhaps in connection with the intensive fortification of the frontier.<sup>32</sup> Some of the latest versions, notably the issues of Flavius Victor and Valentinian III have more direct messages like *SPES ROMANORVM* (Fig. 17), *CASTRA* or *CAS VIC*.<sup>33</sup>

Since these later camp gate depictions lack almost all architectural details (door leaves, arch, cornice, windows) it seems to be least likely that any attention was paid to a minute detail like a signaling device. When compared to depictions of fortifications in Roman art, the spherical objects over the ashlar wall seem to be rather simplified images of conical roofs of turrets. Due to the symbolic nature of the coin reverse depictions, especially on these lowest denominations, the form of the turrets could be changed deliberately, and their number was also of little importance. Even the Roman cityscapes, which are realistic looking at first sight appear to be inaccurate and confusing when studied in detail. The relief displayed in Celano, believed to depict one of the cities near Lacus Fucinus, is a good example for this, because it

27 BERGER 1981, 13–18.

28 BERGER 1981, 16.

29 ELKINS 2015, 129.

30 The reverses of Gratian are more detailed and were revived by the usurpers.

31 ELKINS 2013, 288.

32 R. ALFÖLDI 1955, 258–259.

33 ELKINS 2013, 289.

shows the fortifications besides a number of houses and other buildings (Fig. 18). The city wall here is represented by disproportionate stone blocks, while the gate is distinguished by a more elaborate wall texture. Either merlons with loopholes or turrets are placed evenly on the top of the wall, and three of them are standing on the top of the gate, thus the composition of the gate recalls the “three-beacon camp gate” depiction (see Diocletian’s coin in Fig. 15). Despite the architectural details which can be regarded as more or less factual, the relief is not a precise depiction, and its vagueness resembles the vistas of the Second Style wall paintings. Because the “camp gates” on coin reverses seem to be related to such cityscapes, it seems clear that little documentary value can be expected from them, especially if we wish to find the image of a Late Roman watchtower.



Fig. 18: Roman city wall and gate, presumably from the 2nd century. Detail of the relief in the Museo d’Arte Sacra della Marsica, Celano. (Photo: Luca Verzulli <https://flic.kr/p/epQnfe>)

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