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THE SPECTACLE BUILDING ON THE COINS OF HERACLEA PONTICA*

Among the coins struck at Heraclea Pontica, in Bithynia, under the reign of Gordian III (AD 238-244), two bronze issues stand out for their unusual reverse type, which features one of the very few images of a spectacle building ever used on Roman provincial coinage¹. We do not know exactly what typology of monument is depicted on the coins, though. The interpretation of the design has generated different views among scholars over the years, none of which has yet, in my opinion, offered an entirely convincing solution. Albeit two proposals have been received more favourably, a stadium or an amphitheatre, a circus and even a theatre have also been suggested. In this paper I will reconsider all the different options and the available data, then I will focus primarily on comparisons with extant iconographic models in imperial and provincial coinage, which I believe have not yet been comprehensively considered.

Architectural coin types are generally difficult to approach due to the methodological issues deriving from their use as iconographic sources for reconstructing monuments and buildings in Rome². The ones depicted on Roman provincial coins pose the additional problem of lacking comparisons from archaeological and textual evidence to find possible models by which they were inspired. This applies to Heraclea too, the ancient Bithy-

* This study stems from the broader research on the Roman provincial coins associated with Greek festivals under the empire, which I undertook as part of Leverhulme Trust Research Project Grant held at the University of Warwick in 2017-2021 (PI Zahra Newby, RPG-2017-051). I am very grateful to Andrew Burnett, Julia Lenaghan, Andrew Leung, and Ursula Quatember for sharing with me their views on the interpretation of this case study. Photo credits: Bernhard Weisser and Karsten Dahmen, Münzkabinett Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; Amelia Dowler, Department of Coins and Medals, British Museum, London; Frederique Duyrat and Julien Olivier, Département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris; Agnese Pergola, Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome; Elena Stol-yarik, American Numismatic Society, New York; Klaus Vondrovec, Münzkabinett, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; Roma Numismatics Limited.

1. To my knowledge, the only other image of a spectacle building is the aerial view of the theatre of Dionysus on the southern slope of the Acropolis used on the 3rd-century coinage of Athens (Kroll-Walker 1993, no. 376). I have recently discussed the meaning of a design featured on some Severan coins of Caesarea Germanica, also in Bithynia, which was traditionally interpreted as the depiction of an amphitheatre, but I believe it is something else; Calomino 2023.

2. Burnett 1999.

nian city resting under modern Ereğ, on the southern coast of the Marmara Sea, of which little is known³. What can be inferred about the spectacle buildings at the site is based on epigraphic testimonies of the contests held at the local festivals. An honorary inscription from Aphrodisias mentions athletic competitions ἐν Ἡρακλεῖα τῇ πρὸς τῷ Πόντῳ between the 2nd and the 3rd-century AD, which were called *Hadrianon Herakleion Isoaktion*⁴. The discipline in which the honorand was awarded was the long-distance run (δόλιχον), which would take place in a stadium. The existence of a theatre⁵ and of a gymnasium are attested by inscriptions too, the latter especially from an Ephebic list from Heraclea in which other race disciplines are mentioned alongside boxing and pancratium⁶. Conversely, there is no evidence for either an amphitheatre or a circus in the city, but this does not preclude the possibility that Heraclea had such monuments, so all options are still virtually on the plate.

The coin type with the spectacle building occurs on two bronze issues of medallion size, one featuring the portrait of Gordian III on the obverse (currently attested by a single specimen at the Bibliothèque nationale de France; fig. 1)⁷, the other a magnificent bust of the mythical founder Heracles, holding his club (known in three specimens held respectively in Berlin, London and Oxford; fig. 2)⁸.

The design consists of two main parts: a large horizontal structure featuring a row of arcades, which ends in the entrance to a gallery to the right; a large circular structure in the background filled with tiny dots, which represents the spectators seating inside the cavea. Three additional figures appear at the centre of the scene: a large hexastyle temple seen from a three-quarter view to the left; a colossal statue of Heracles enthroned to the

3. The reference study is still Hoepfner 1966.

4. Moretti 1953, no. 80, and Roueché 1993, no. 70. The inscription on a sarcophagus of a pancratiast, also found at Aphrodisias, includes the word Ἡρακλείων within a wreath. Pancratiast was usually held in stadia too, but we cannot be sure to which Heraclea exactly the text refers (other cities mentioned are Sardis, Laodicea, Mytilene, Hierapolis, Ephesus and Aphrodisias in Asia Minor; Laodicea and Antioch in Syria); *ibid.*, no. 71. We probably have the same problem with the *Herakleia Epinikia* mentioned in Moretti 1953, no. 68 (from Naples); cf. Blanco-Pérez 2018, p. 15.

5. *IK Heraclea Pontica*, no. 61, and Şahin 1975.

6. *IK Heraclea Pontica*, no. 60, and Öztürk 2016.

7. *RPC VII 2*, 2080.

8. The obverse legend refers to Heracles as ΤΟΝ ΚΤΙΣΤΑΝ. All three specimens come from the same pair of dies; the reverse die was also used to strike the only known specimen with the portrait of Gordian and its legend reads: ΗΡΑΚΛΕΩΤΑΝ ΜΑΤΡΟΣ ΑΠΟΙΚΩΝ ΠΟΛΙΩΝ. *RPC VII 2*, 2091.

right; a human figure standing between them, possibly a victorious athlete crowning himself.

We can interpret the god's image as a projection of a cult-stature that would arguably rest inside the temple devoted to him: this appears to indicate that the whole scene must be interpreted within the context of the city's festivals in his honour. This is not necessarily a clue to what type of building it could be because, even though the main agonistic attractions were usually athletic contests held inside the stadium, chariot races as well as gladiatorial spectacles were integral part of festivals too. On the other hand, if the human figure were definitely an athlete, the natural environment in which he would be expected to perform was of course the stadium.

That this design was not easy to understand seemed clear from the earliest discussion on its possible interpretation that we are aware of, which is recorded in the pages of 17th-century Roman antiquarians. Commenting on the specimen that was part of the Carpegna collection, before entering the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris, Raffaele Fabretti described the building as a circus. In response to him, having identified an athlete in the standing figure, in his *Scelta de Medaglioni* (1679) Giovanni Pietro Bellori argued that it was in fact a gymnasium or a stadium, the venues in which athletes would have usually performed⁹.

The question remained unresolved in the first modern numismatic commentary to the coinage of Heraclea Pontica, published in the 1908 volume of the *Recueil Général des monnaies grecques d'Asie Mineure*, which gave contrasting views on the building's function. The catalogue included the specimen held in Paris with the imperial bust of Gordian on the obverse and the one in Berlin with the bust of Heracles: in one case the reverse design is described as the aerial view of a theatre¹⁰, in the other as that of a stadium¹¹. The idea that the building is a theatre has been followed only in the recent catalogue of *SNG France* of Pontus and Paphlagonia¹², otherwise it has been received with little favour.

In 1971, Martin Price published a much more in-depth analysis of the Heracleian issues when one of the specimens without imperial portrait en-

9. Modolo 2018, pp. 75-83, 221 f., referring to BAV, Ott. Lat. 2972, f. 32r.

10. *RGMG* I 4, p. 379 no. 225; *RPC* VII 2, 2080.

11. *RGMG* I 1, p. 357 no. 76. That the authors considered this to be a different reverse design from the other is confirmed by the fact that the statue to the right is described as one of Dionysus rather than of Heracles.

12. *SNG France* 368; *RPC* VII 2, 2091. See also Dalaison 2017, p. 277 no. 9.

tered the British Museum collection¹³. He identified the building as «at least» an amphitheatre or, rather, a stadium, mainly because of its size compared to that of a theatre. He pointed out that it needed to be large enough to accommodate a temple, which «one might expect to have stood with its back against the surrounding wall». Price later included this design in the corpus of architectural types from Rome and the imperial provinces collated with Bluma Trell, stressing that it shows a «stadium building with temple at one end», perhaps considering the possibility that the shrine lay right outside the stadium rather than inside¹⁴. Indeed, the temple is an argument used elsewhere to support the identification as a stadium, especially by Simon Price, who cited the Heraclea coin type as an example of a stadium ‘containing’ a temple. He also referred to some passages in Pausanias’ *Periegesis of Greece* where this type of architectural association would be documented, even though the Greek text never actually talks about temples placed inside stadia. For instance, when the author describes the sanctuary of Apollo at Troezenes, he mentions a temple of Aphrodite «above» (ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ) the stadium (2.32.3); likewise, at Hermione, he writes about a stadium «by the side» (παρὰ δὲ αὐτῶν) of a temple of Athena (2.34.10), and, at Megalopolis, about a stadium extending to one end to a theatre and to the other to a temple of Dionysus (8.34.10)¹⁵. Overall, there does not seem to be archaeological evidence attesting the presence of a temple inside a stadium incorporated into the cavea.

The latest publication of the Heracleian coin types is the second part of volume VII in the *Roman Provincial Coinage* series, devoted to the coinage of the Gordians minted outside the province of Asia. In this case the authors have chosen to describe the spectacle building as an amphitheatre¹⁶. One can see why this would be still a plausible option: the upper portion of the design, shaped as a large circular cavea which would form the other half of the ellipse, recalls the characteristic bird-eye view of the Colosseum on Roman imperial coins and medallions (fig. 3)¹⁷.

Admittedly, an image of Heracles as patron god fits better in connection with gladiatorial *mumera* than with athletics, though he used to be wor-

13. Price 1971, pp. 125 f.

14. Price-Trell 1977, p. 218 fig. 473. Erol-Özdizbay 2011, p. 244, also described the building as a stadium.

15. Price 1984, p. 110 n. 60.

16. *RPC* VII 2, pp. 4 and 32.

17. For an overview, see Elkins 2015, pp. 80-82 and 103 f. Cf. also Price-Trell 1977, pp. 60-62.

shipped also in gymnasia alongside Hermes¹⁸. Still, if we assume that the engraver at Heraclea took inspiration from the Colosseum model, it is clear that the final result diverges substantially from its prototype. It is especially on this point, the comparison with potential matches in metropolitan iconography for the design adopted on the coinage of Heraclea, that I shall base my discussion and a different interpretation of its meaning.

Instead of the traditional view of the whole amphitheatre, which shows the external façade with three levels of arcades, here we seem to be presented with only the upper tier of the building. The other major problem with identifying an amphitheatre on the Heraclea coin is the presence of the gallery at the bottom right of the building, which seems out of place. In fact, this image is typical of the iconography of another two architectural coin types, the stadium and the circus. This aspect was examined more in detail by Ben Lee Damsky in 1990, in a paper on the only extant iconography of a stadium on Roman coinage: the aureus of Septimius Severus featuring the stadium of Domitian (fig. 4)¹⁹.

This would be the model by which the Heracleian coin type might have been inspired. Unlike our design, the building on the aureus is open to the left to mark the difference between the straight end on one side and the rounded one on the other, which is on the right. Still, what the engraver at Heraclea might have borrowed from this model is the «convention of showing only the end arch of the far arm». Two tiers of arcades are clearly outlined, decorated with statues, while the inner view of the building shows scenes of athletic competitions ranging from foot-racing to boxing, including the image of a togate victor lifting his right hand to his head, which could also have served as a reference for the human figure on the Heracleian coins. However, there are major discrepancies between the aureus and the Bithynian issues, especially the absence of the temple from the metropolitan iconography and the fact that on our design there is only one 'end arch' to the right.

This is a detail that the Heracleian design shares with the coin imagery of another type of building: the circus. The Circus Maximus is represented on two occasions on Roman coinage: under Trajan and under Caracalla (figs. 5-6), later also on bronze medallions of Gordian III and Philip the Arab²⁰.

18. See *IG XII 5*, 911 and *IG XII 5*, 818.

19. Damsky 1990. See Elkins 2015, p. 99, on the different interpretations of this type over the years (described as a circus in *RIC IV 1*, no. 260), before it was unanimously identified as a stadium.

20. See Woytek 2010, no. 175, and Elkins 2015, pp. 86 f., 103. The iconography adopted on Trajan's coins was very influential over the years, as it served as a reference for the iconogra-

Both coin designs draw upon the same iconography, which presents an elongated heavy base with arcades in a row; this ends in a higher arcade to the right, which looks like a 'gallery', as on the Heracleian coin type. The upper portion of the building shows an aerial view of the inside of the Circus and the structure where the spectators sit, which interestingly has a lightly curved shape, which could also recall the Heracleian design. One last crucial element that the two architectural coin types have in common is of course the presence of a temple: a tiny tetrastyle shrine, seen from the front, in the Circus' cavea, versus the much more imposing hexastyle temple seen from three-quarter at Heraclea. Damsky cited the Bithynian coin design as a remarkable parallel to the stadium, so much as to suggest that «it seems probable that the die engraver [...] based its design on the earlier aureus»²¹. Indeed, he stressed two common features of the designs that I have highlighted here: that «a single row of arches is punctuated by a higher arch at the right» and that «the far arm of the stadium curves noticeably and is filled with a crowd». However, his argument becomes weak when he describes the temple on the left «which appears to be incorporated into the structure», because this does not find a parallel in the stadium's image; in fact, the only comparison that would have supported Damsky's reasoning is the representation of the Circus Maximus on Trajan's sestertii.

The temple represented in the numismatic iconography of the Circus is inserted into the seating in the background (the Aventine side of the cavea), breaking its line, to the left of the obelisk: it is probably the temple of the Sun and the Moon, which Humphrey suggests was built inside the circus under Nero and then restored after the fire in AD 64²². This detail became embedded into the iconography of the circus on coins and medallions, where the temple has six columns instead of four: a discrepancy implying that, rather than a realistic depiction of the building, it served as a distinctive landmark of the circus' architectural structure. What matters here, anyway, is that the imagery of temples or shrines in association with spectacle buildings, regardless of its reliability for the purpose of reconstructing their actual appearance, is particular to Roman circuses²³. For all these reasons, I be-

phies used in other contexts and media, for instance on mosaics and sculpted reliefs; Humphrey 1986, p. 210. The medallions are catalogued in Gnecci 1912, II, p. 90 no. 27 (Gordian III) and p. 99 no. 12 (Philip the Arab).

21. Damsky 1990, pp. 98 f. n. 63.

22. Humphrey 1986, pp. 91-95.

23. The temple in the Circus Maximus is visible in the same position on the coins of Caracalla and on medallions of Philip the Arab. Other images of temple-like monuments with

lieve that the circus is an option that should be seriously considered for identifying the spectacle building of Heraclea Pontica.

Besides the architecture, also the 'human' figures depicted in the central scene need to be further analysed, especially one detail which has been largely neglected in the past and can be functional to this new interpretation: the iconography of the colossal statue of Heracles. The god is seated on a throne of rocks, while he is holding a cantharus in the right hand, extended towards the human figure in front of him, and a club, his main attribute, in the left hand. The latter is almost concealed because Heracles is resting on it, so it could be mistaken for a leg of his seat and this is probably why it has been sometimes overlooked in the type descriptions²⁴. Furthermore, the club looks very worn on the specimen in Berlin, which is the most legible of all, but it can be seen a bit more distinctly on the other ones (fig. 7). Nevertheless, the design shows another long vertical object behind Heracles' back, which Price loosely described as «another club»²⁵.

I find this pleonastic, as it seems unlikely that the god's attribute was repeated twice in the same scene; besides, the object looks exceedingly long in proportion to Heracles' body. Damsky explained that it could have been added to clarify the god's identity and he pointed out that the iconography of the seated Heracles is attested on other civic issues struck under Gordian himself²⁶. Indeed, that was arguably the prototype for the design in which the statue sits inside the spectacle building: but while the club is being held by Heracles in the same way, there is nothing behind his back (fig. 8).

In my view, this actually suggests that the object depicted inside the spectacle building could be something else. If this were a circus, the most logical option would be an obelisk or one of the *metae* standing on both ends of the

columns and pediments featuring inside the iconography of the circus on visual media (gems, reliefs, mosaics) may perhaps refer to the *pulvinar* (*ibid.*, pp. 78-83), the shrine of Murcia (*ibid.*, pp. 95-97), or even *aediculae* (*ibid.*, pp. 278-80). See a discussion on other possible examples of temples built inside circuses in Zevi 1976, pp. 1047-50.

24. In fact, we cannot be entirely sure that a seat, possibly a throne, is depicted at all, because Heracles is almost reclining on a bed of rocks, as he usually does in similar designs (see below). There are, however, two vertical lines to the right of his head and one to the left of it that seem to be part of the backseat.

25. Price 1971, p. 125. See also *RPC* VII 2, p. 36. Conversely, only the club held by the statue of Heracles is described in *RGMG* I 1, which omits to mention the object behind.

26. *RPC* VII 2, no. 2107 (*SNG* *vA* 429) and *RGMG* I 1, no. 221 (*SNG* *France* 369). Cf. Damsky 1990, p. 99 n. 64. Further doubts on the interpretation of this image as a club are cast in Begass 2025, p. 195, although his suggestion that the seated figure could be in fact an agonothetes is fascinating but hard to demonstrate.

central *spina* – the continuous barrier forming two separate race-tracks, whose usual designation in the Roman world was actually *euripus*²⁷. The obelisk was ubiquitous in the iconography of circuses on Roman coinage and other media: it is normally placed in the middle of the building and presents an unmistakably elongated pyramidal shape²⁸. This model became so rooted in Roman visual culture that the same iconography was reused decades later on contorniates featuring the Circus Maximus²⁹. If the alleged second club on the coins of Caesarea were actually an obelisk, it could have been moved to one side to make room for the central scene of the design, the encounter between Heracles and the other figure standing before him. Admittedly, the shape of the obelisk is slightly different from that of its iconographic model; it looks more conical than the one normally displayed on imperial coins, hence its resemblance to a club. But even in metropolitan art we find similar instances. The dated issues celebrating the games for the 874th birthday of Rome under Hadrian (AD 121) show the Genius of the Circus reclined while holding a wheel and three obelisks shaped like the object on the coins of Heraclea (fig. 9)³⁰.

Alternatively, the mysterious object on Heraclea's issues could be a conical *meta*, whose shape on coinage was even closer to that of a 'club', as it can be observed, for instance, on Roman medallions of Gordian III (AD 244): they show the inner view of the circus, so that only the elements of the *spina* are visible in the background, while images of athletic performances come in the foreground (fig. 10). This hypothesis seems less probable, though, because *metae* were usually depicted in pairs rather than alone.

The interpretation of the second figure depicted in the scene, arguably a nude man standing in front of Heracles, is certainly less problematic, as the design seems to conform to a very popular athletic iconography whereby the victor is holding a palm branch and crowning himself with a wreath³¹. Notably, there seems to be no point of reference for the whole design

27. Humphrey 1986, pp. 175 f.; Dodge 2014, p. 562.

28. Humphrey 1986, pp. 269-72.

29. See especially the design taken directly from the imperial sestertii, cf. Alföldi *et al.* 1976, p. 25 no. 90 (Homer on the obverse), p. 101 no. 312 (Trajan on the obverse). A simplified version shows only the *spina* with the *metae* and obelisk, surrounded by charioteers above and below: cf. *ibid.*, p. 78 no. 230 (Nero on the obverse), p. 121 no. 361 (Trajan on the obverse).

30. *RIC* II.3, nos. 353 f., 407-409 and 2795.

31. This imagery became popular in the Greek east in the 2nd century AD. We see it in the gallery of athletes depicted on the mosaic floor found at Psila Alonia Square in Patras (Dunbabin 2016, p. 20) and it appears on Roman provincial coinage, for the first time at Nicaea in Bithynia under Commodus (*RGMG* I 3, p. 438 no. 317; *RPC* IV 1, temp. no. 6057).

adopted on the coins of Heraclea, which combines two self-standing iconographic models together, the one of Heracles seated on a rock and that of a triumphant athlete. The closest parallel is possibly a scene depicted on a mosaic decoration from Antium (Villa Corsini Sarsina). Here the god is portrayed in a posture similar to the one depicted on the coins, reclining on a rock, except that he is holding the club in his right hand instead of a cup, which is being held in the other hand. The young male naked figure in front of him, standing frontally and looking towards him, is his companion Iolaus (fig. 11), who happens to be commonly known as Heracles' charioteer³², but this is probably a coincidence. The important thing to stress about the identity of the figure standing before Heracles, almost certainly an athlete, is that the iconography used to depict him does not clash with the scenario of a provincial circus, which was not only a venue for chariot races, but could also host contests that would be usually held elsewhere.

This crucial point can be deduced from both visual and material evidence. An example of the former is the scene illustrated on Gordian's medallions mentioned above, which shows couples of boxers and wrestlers training or competing against each other inside the Circus Maximus. Above all, we rely on the combined analysis of archaeological and epigraphic evidence. The comparative study of the spectacle buildings discovered in the provinces has shown that, since it was the largest building for entertainment in the Roman world, the circus was often conceived as multipurpose, even if not necessarily from the time of its construction³³. There was significant overlap especially between the structural plan of stadia and circuses, which might have impacted their function too. They were essentially similar in shape – stadia in the Hellenistic and Roman periods tended to have only one semi-circular end, and they sometimes had, like circuses, the long sides slightly curved outwards about halfway-along³⁴, so the two types of buildings differed primarily in scale. Since only the biggest cities in the Roman world could host both a stadium and a circus, some of the largest circuses had a double function³⁵. In the eastern Mediterranean, where circuses were called hippodromes³⁶, this was actually a pattern: almost all the buildings

32. *MAI*, pp. 68-71 no. 55, pl. XLII fig. 56. The mosaic belongs to the collections of Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, but is currently on display in the Museo Civico Archeologico at Anzio.

33. Dodge 2014, pp. 561 f.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 562 f. and 568.

35. This happened at the Circus Maximus in Rome too; Humphrey 1986, p. 3.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-12. A number of 2nd and 3rd-century circuses, possibly developed from earlier hippodromes, are attested in the Levant and Egypt (Antioch, Laodicea, Berytus, Tyre, Cae-

known as stadia from inscriptions and literary sources could fall into that category, as they served for both athletic and equestrian events³⁷. Their measures appear to fall half-way between the two typologies of buildings, being larger and longer than proper stadia, but narrower and shorter than actual hippodromes³⁸. Although there is no archaeological or epigraphic evidence to back this hypothesis, it does not seem implausible to envisage that one of these multipurpose buildings existed in a city like Heraclea Pontica, which hosted local festivals on a regular basis³⁹.

To conclude, I have re-examined previous scholarship and available material evidence to identify the spectacle building featured on 3rd-century issues of Heraclea Pontica. Rather than an amphitheatre or a stadium, the two proposals which have prevailed in past and recent literature, I have argued, primarily on the basis of iconographic analysis, that the building could be a circus-hippodrome. The fact that the human figure depicted in front of Heracles is probably an athlete suggests that the building was used for chariot races as well as for athletic contests at the local festivals dedicated to the god. This might have been common practice if we accept the possibility that the building had been conceived as (or turned into) a multipurpose venue, used both as a stadium and a circus, as it seems to have been often the case in the cities of the Roman east. The discussion on the coin design might seem largely unnecessary if the building does not need to fit into a strict taxonomy. However, for the scope of this paper it is probably not so important to establish what type of circus was in use at Heraclea, but to under-

sarea Maritima, Bostra, Gerasa, Alexandria, Antinoopolis), while chariot races are documented in various sites in Asia Minor (Pergamum, Sardis, Aphrodisias, Xanthos, Ancyra, Caesarea in Cappadocia, Seleucia ad Calycadnum, Tarsus, Adana); *ibid.*, pp. 438-539.

37. Humphrey has coined the bizarre name «amphitheatrical hippo-stadia» to describe these hybrid venues, which were regarded as 'amphitheatres' by ancient authors (*Ios. antiq.* XV 341), meaning that they had seats at both ends. In this category, he includes the ones discovered at Caesarea Maritima, Alexandria, Gortyn, Cyrene, and, in Asia Minor, Caesarea in Cappadocia, Anazarbus, Nysa, Laodicea and Aphrodisias. The stadium of Aphrodisias, for instance, one of the best-preserved in the Mediterranean, was c. 260 meters long, well beyond the standard length of 180 meters. While chariot races are well documented at the site, there is no evidence for a hippodrome, so they were probably held inside the stadium; Humphrey 1996, pp. 121-24; Dodge 2014, p. 566. The lack of a spina does not preclude the possibility that there was a temporary wooden barrier that served the purpose; cf. Welch 1998, pp. 557 f. n. 31, admitting this as an option, but stressing that an open field venue would be more appropriate to host chariot races.

38. Dodge 2008.

39. Nicomedia in Bithynia is the closest city to Heraclea which we know had a circus, whose construction dates to the reign of Diocletian; Humphrey 1986, pp. 579-82.

stand what iconographic model the mint engraver chose to follow on the coins of Gordian III. This was a Roman model, the mainstream image of the Circus Maximus known primarily from coin types, but widely disseminated also on many other visual media well beyond the Italian peninsula. It seems likely that the die-cutter was inspired by a very popular metropolitan iconography (unlike that of the stadium) and tailored it for the local context, adding the temple (somehow annexed to the monument) and, above all, fitting the images of the god and the athlete inside the building, each following its own iconographic model rooted in the eastern Greek artistic tradition. As a unique example of coin iconography borrowed from Roman art and reinterpreted through the lens of provincial visual culture, the design of the spectacle building does not need to be an exact numismatic reproduction of the Heracleian monument, but it might reflect the artist's choice to draw upon a shared visual language in order to make it look like the greatest circus in the Roman world.

ABBREVIATIONS

BMCRM

H.A. Grueber, *Roman Medallions in the British Museum*, London 1874

IK Heraclea Pontica

L. Jonnes (ed.), *The Inscriptions of Heraclea Pontica. With a Prosopographia Heracleotica* by W. Ameling («Inschriften Griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien» 47), Bonn 1994

MAI

V. Santa Maria Scrinari - M.L. Morricone Matini, *Mosaici antichi in Italia, Regione I Anzio*, Roma 1975

RGMG

E. Babelon - T. Reinach - W.H. Waddington, *Recueil Général des monnaies grecques d'Asie Mineure*, 4 vols., Paris 1908-1925

SNG France

J. Dalaisson, *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum. France, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Médailles, VII. Paphlagonie, Pont, Arménie Mineure*, Bordeaux 2015

SNG vA

G. Kleiner, *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum. Deutschland. Sammlung v. Aulock, 1-3. Pontus, Paphlagonien, Bithynien*, Berlin 1957

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DARIO CALOMINO

★

Questo contributo prende in esame un tipo monetale di rovescio di alcune emissioni bronzee di Heraclea Pontica (Bitinia) al tempo di Gordiano III (238-244 d.C.), che ritrae un edificio per spettacoli di incerta interpretazione. Dopo un riesame degli studi passati, si propone una nuova ipotesi critica basata sia su confronti con modelli iconografici di riferimento nella monetazione imperiale e romana provinciale, sia sull'analisi delle evidenze archeologiche di monumenti per spettacoli esistenti nelle province romane. Secondo tale ipotesi l'edificio non sarebbe né un teatro, né un anfiteatro, né uno stadio, come si è supposto in passato, ma un circo-ippodromo adibito sia alle corse dei carri sia all'atletica.

This paper examines the reverse type adopted on some bronze coins struck at Heraclea Pontica (Bithynia) under Gordian III (AD 238-244), which shows a spectacle building of uncertain interpretation. It revisits previous scholarship and proposes a new hypothesis on the basis of comparisons with extant iconographic models in imperial and provincial coinage and of the surviving archaeological evidence of similar monuments in the Roman provinces. It is argued that the coins depict neither a theatre nor an amphitheater or a stadium, as it has been suggested in the past, but a circus-hippodrome that was used both for chariot races and athletics.



Fig. 1. Heraclea Pontica under Gordian III (AD 238-244), AE. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France 720 (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8555878z>): 26.61g; 36mm (enlarged, not to scale). *RPC VII 2*, no. 2080.



Fig. 2. Heraclea Pontica under Gordian III (AD 238-244), AE. Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 18273479, 1846/7134 (<https://ikmk.smb.museum/object?id=18273479>): 25.68g; 34mm (enlarged, not to scale). *RPC VII 2*, no. 2091.2.

THE SPECTACLE BUILDING ON THE COINS OF HERACLEA PONTICA



Fig. 3. Domitian (AD 81-82), Rome, OR sestertius. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Münzkabinett 1296 Kassel, 18204487 (<https://ikmk.smb.museum/object?id=18204487>): 24.83g; 33mm (enlarged, not to scale). Cf. *RIC* II 1, no. 131.



Fig. 4. Septimius Severus (AD 202-210), Rome, AV aureus. New York, American Numismatic Society 1996.110.2 (<http://numismatics.org/collection/1996.110.2>): 7.18g; 20mm (200%). Cf. *RIC* IV 1, no. 260.



Fig. 5. Trajan (AD 103-104). Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Münzkabinett RÖ8287 (<https://www.ikmk.at/object?lang=en&cid=ID60397>): 29.81g; 34mm (enlarged, not to scale). Cf. *RIC* II, no. 571, and Woytek 2010, no. 175b.



Fig. 6. Caracalla (AD 213), Rome, OR sestertius. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Münzkabinett RÖ15492 (<https://www.ikmk.at/object?lang=en&cid=ID67602&view=rs>): 26.20g; 33mm (enlarged, not to scale). Cf. *RIC* IV 1, no. 500a.

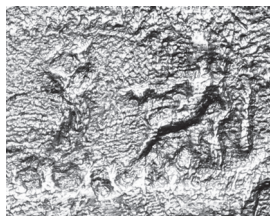


Fig. 7. Heraclea Pontica under Gordian III (AD 238-244), AE. London, British Museum 1970,0909.28.2 (<https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coin/101431>): 22.17g; 35mm (reverse enlarged). *RPC* VII 2, no. 2091.1.



Fig. 8. Heraclea Pontica under Gordian III (AD 238-244), AE. Roma Numismatics XVIII, 29 September 2019, lot 444: 9.76g; 28mm (enlarged, not to scale). Cf. *RPC* VII 2, no. 2063.



Fig. 9. Hadrian (AD 121), Rome, AV aureus. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Münzkabinett 1877/162, 18201655 (<https://ikmk.smb.museum/object?id=18201655>): 6.89g; 19mm (200%). Cf. *RIC* II, no. 144 = *RIC* II 3, no. 353; Calicò 2003, I, no. 1200.



Fig. 10. Gordian III (AD 244), Rome, bimetallic medallion. London, British Museum 1866,0721.2 (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1866-0721-2): 59.48g; 38mm (enlarged, not to scale). *BMC RM*, p. 46 no. 5.

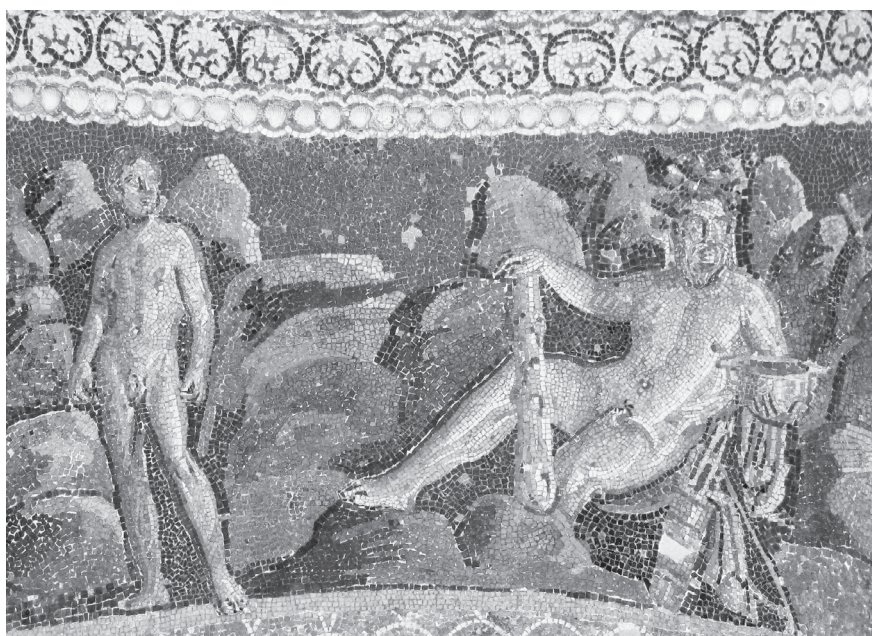


Fig. 11. Polychrome mosaic of Hercules and Iolaus from Villa Corsini Sarsina, Anzio. Museo Nazionale Romano di Palazzo Massimo inv. 115167. © Italian Ministry of Culture - Museo Nazionale Romano, Photographic archive. Photo L. De Masi (used by permission).