Depictions of architecture are some of the most abundant and underanalyzed elements of Roman art. Although the material culture of the Roman empire is replete with illustrations of built structures, for centuries scholarship on architectural depictions has focused almost exclusively on particular issues of topography and reconstruction, rarely moving beyond such questions as “which building is depicted?” and “what did temple X look like?” Recently, however, scholars are employing these depictions in their search to understand what architecture reveals about Roman attitudes toward architecture in general, not just depicted structures. Such scholarship employs contextualization to push back against traditional habits of cherry-picking ancient representations of buildings for independent analysis, as if those images’ raison d’être was to provide helpful architectural snapshots for future archaeologists.

It is such contextualization that sets Elkins’ recent monograph apart within scholarship on what is now called *architectura numismatica*, where studies are almost as numerous as the coins they examine. In its structure, the book is a roundup of all coins featuring depictions of architecture and produced by the Roman mint from the Republican through the Late Imperial periods. Yet Elkins’ most significant contributions are in his approach to the material and the questions he asks. Rather than seeing these coins as inevitable, he asks why illustrations of buildings appeared on coins when they did and seeks to situate the coins’ iconography within their greater political, social, and artistic climate. In many ways Elkins’ volume is an answer to Burnett’s call to arms (“Buildings and Monuments on Roman Coins,” in G.M. Paul and M. Ierardi, eds., *Roman Coins and Public Life Under the Empire*. E. Togo Salmon Papers 2 [Ann Arbor, Mich. 1999] 137–64), which encouraged scholars to explore questions of broader social significance than reconstruction and which hitherto has seen surprisingly little response.

In the book’s introduction, Elkins lays a clear historical and methodological foundation for his study. He seeks to engage directly with the oft-observed but rarely scrutinized fact that the depiction of architecture on coins was a distinctive Roman phenomenon. Although Greek and Persian cities did occasionally feature architecture on their coins (ch. 1 provides examples and discussion), the author argues that “the Roman use of the iconography of building was fundamentally different” in that “the architectural images on coins from Rome commemorated or politicized the monument in question” (1). Elkins ties his approach to recent trends in numismatic and art historical scholarship that interpret images within complex visual systems. He also draws attention to new archaeological questions about ancient coins, particularly regarding audience targeting.

The strongest section of the book is the analysis of Republican architectural types (ch. 1). Elkins provides an overview (with illustrations) of each architectural type produced by the primary Roman mints, arranged chronologically beginning with the first depicted structure (the Columna Minucia on denarii of 135 B.C.E.). Each type’s entry includes bibliography and obligatory discussion of which building is shown. But, more importantly, Elkins also notes what else was going on at the time, both in Rome and within Roman coinage. For example, he observes that the Temple of Jupiter Libertas that appeared on denarius reverses of C. Egnatius in
76 B.C.E. was coupled with an obverse design of a bust of Cupid and that allusions to Venus and Libertas were features of all the moneyer’s denarii that year, possibly in a populist rebuke to Sulla’s appropriation of Venus (26). Similarly, the famous coins struck by M. Aemilius Lepidus featuring a building (either the Basilica or Porticus Aemilia) in 58 B.C.E. were part of a series honoring the moneyer’s illustrious ancestor; the series included a reference to a statue, erected for bravery in battle, and an illustration of the hero taking on the guardianship of Ptolemy V (28–9). By providing such context, Elkins ably demonstrates that architectural types were just one means among many that moneyers employed, often in tandem, to convey politicized messages. It should be noted that the chronology of Republican coinage is often subject to revision, and thus some of the precise links that Elkins draws between particular political events and coin types may need to be revisited. But this does not undermine his larger approach or conclusions.

He emphasizes that architectural types emerge at the same time as the Lex Gabinia (139 B.C.E.), which seems to have been a factor in amplifying competition between elite Roman families. He draws connections not only to increased contemporary building activity in Rome, with more monuments named for their patrons, but also to the emerging phenomenon of so-called Second Style Wall Painting, with its emphasis on illusionistic architectural vistas. Elkins demonstrates a keen eye for formal detail here, noting similar approaches between paintings and coins in aspects such as the handling of roofs. This observation, that the coins are part of a broader political and artistic phenomenon that emphasized monumental architecture across genres, is critical.

This section also demonstrates a shortcoming of the book: the pictures of coins are reproduced to scale, meaning many of the depictions themselves are very difficult to see (e.g., fig. 37). While this is standard practice for a strictly numismatic study, enlarged images, perhaps of select obverses, would have made discussions on composition easier to follow. As many illustrations are drawn from the American Numismatic Society’s collection, an easy work-around can be found in the excellent images available on that institution’s website.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide a similar catalogue and analysis of architectural types for the Early Imperial (Augustus–Severus Alexander) and Late Imperial (“Soldier Emperors”–Valentinian III) periods, respectively. Elkins cogently demonstrates how architectural types continued to work within broader ideological programs (e.g., Tiberius’ Temple of Concordia types were produced in a series that celebrated imperial virtues in general). He also has interesting points about shifts in building types depicted and the denominations employed. Particularly for the later empire, provincial coinage (examined briefly in the “Conclusions” chapter) needs more discussion; a local tradition of camp gates on coins in the Danube provinces seems significant in light of those areas’ importance to the same soldier emperors who introduced the type to imperial mints, and it seems to warrant more than a passing mention. But the generic Late Imperial types also demonstrate the strength and flexibility of the author’s overall approach: by focusing on the imagery, rather than the identity, of depicted structures, he is able to situate these types within broader happenings in the imperial mint, such as the breakdown of centralized production and a concomitant shift to easily repeatable designs.

Elkins’ book is a welcome contribution to multiple fields of scholarship. It is essentially a numismatic, more than iconographic, study. But its overall message and approach can be applied to numerous fields where architectural representations have played an important role, including wall painting and monumental reliefs. Elkins also has interesting things to say about the ways in which Roman officials attempted to communicate with the people they ruled, and the book is of interest for audiences outside the field of material culture as well.

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