

“Without symmetry and proportion there can be no principles in the design of any temple; that is, if there is no precise relation between its members, as in the case of those of a well shaped man.”

Vitruvius, *De Architectura*

Roman coins are gateways into the ancient world. Through them, one is able to view the political culture during the time of their mint. Each coin is a narrative history. If an emperor like Trajan conquered the Dacians, his coin would illustrate that succinctly (IMP CAES NER TRAIAN OPTIM AVG DAC PARTHICO) (*Below*). In these few abbreviations one learns of Trajan’s entire life, as he would present it to his subjects. More telling than the traditional CAES or AVG appellations and the classically idealized bust on the obverse of the coin is the selection of the reverse subject. In most cases the reverse is occupied by a personification of a virtue like Spes, Roma, Fortuna, or other such “deity”. Less often, however, images of architecture appear on the reverse and evince much more than a virtue could.



Trajan Denarius with Column of Trajan on the reverse



Hexastyle temple with Roma seated inside

The great majority of the architectural examples on coins are symbolic temples. These temples come in four basic forms. The first and most prolific is a symmetric hexastyle temple with a virtue seated inside (*Left*). As the name suggests the hexastyle temple consists of six columns lining the portico. This style of temple is most often associated with the personification of Rome, Roma. Unlike many of the other temples few named hexastyle temples exist on Roman coins, since there were so very many hexastyle temples in Rome. Instead, temples of this ilk serve much like the personified virtues who inhabit them. That is to say

most exist merely on the symbolic level. The Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus (*Below*), the Temple of Concord, the Temple of Vespasian and Titus, the Temple of Saturn, and The Temple of Vesta (*Below*) are all important hexastyle temples. Symbolic as the hexastyle temples are, there were important as archetypal architectural examples. Vitruvius, the authority on ancient

architecture, believed as the opening quote evidences that perfect symmetry must exist in the temple for it to be considered worthy of



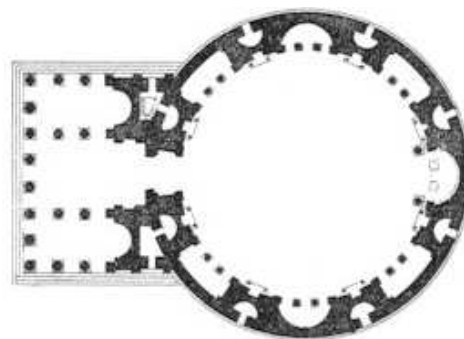
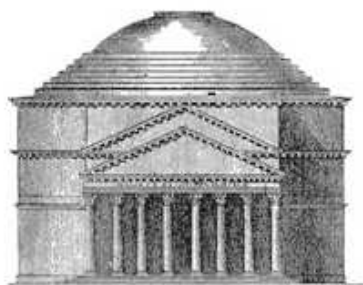
Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus (Petillius and Volteius)

the gods. “The length of a temple must be twice its width. The cell itself is to be in length one fourth part more than the breadth, including the wall in which



Temple of Vesta (Nero)

the doors are placed. The remaining three parts run forward to the antae of the walls of the pronaos, which antae are to be of the same thickness as the columns.”¹ Roman temples were built with such exacting specifications, that only a minimal amount of leeway could be practiced. All temples, as the coins evidence, have an even number of columns on the portico. Even the revolutionary Pantheon (*Left*)² was built with even numbered columns on its façade. How then does this transfer to the reverses of coins?



Coins served to tout the emperor’s exploits as well as his good deeds, i.e. the dedication of a temple or the building of a market. Just as the emperor’s bust is idealized, so is the depiction of the temples. In this coin of Augustus issued by a mint in Asia Minor, the temple of Mars Ultor, dedicated May 12, 20 BC, is shown with the legionary standard returned by the Parthians (*Right*). Cassius Dio speaks of Augustus, “Indeed, in honor of this success [of gaining the standard from Phraates] he commanded that sacrifices be decreed and likewise a temple to Mars Ultor on the Capitol, in imitation of that of Jupiter Feretrius, in which to dedicate the standards; and he himself carried out both decrees.



Temple of Mars Ultor (Augustus)

Moreover he rode into the city on horseback and was honored with a triumphal arch.”³ To celebrate this triumphal arch (*Left*), as per tradition, a coin was minted, on which Augustus is seen in a quadriga flanked by two Parthians. The temple of Mars Ultor was actually a large octostyle temple (*recreated on the right*), yet appears to be a small distyle altar with the Parthian standard displayed proudly in the middle. In these two Augustine coins, the architecture plays two roles. It both commemorates Augustus’ victories and building projects and acts as the frame of a picture in which the greatness of Augustus is celebrated symbolically.



Triumphal Arch of Augustus



Macellum Magnum (Nero)

Another Emperor whose reign is represented with architecture on coins is Nero. The irony in this is that in AD 64 he is rumored to have started the fire which consumed much of Rome. His reign was a turbulent one, and Nero was a paranoid emperor. He did however procure peace for the empire, and in doing so he closed the doors to the temple of Janus (*Right*). It is said, though, that Nero did so to gain popularity since during his reign there was a revolt in



Temple of Janus with closed doors (Nero)

¹ http://www.ukans.edu/history/index/europe/ancient_rome/E/Roman/Texts/Vitruvius/4.html#4.1

² (picture of Pantheon) <http://www.uh.edu/engines/pantheon.jpg>

³ http://www.ukans.edu/history/index/europe/ancient_rome/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius_Dio/54*.html#8.3

Judea, and he put many men to death with the suspicion of conspiracy. Nero also built the Macellum Magnum, a “shopping mall” located on the Caelian Hill, in AD 59 (*Previous Page*). It was an octostyle temple with a large central dome. Like Augustus, Nero defeated the Parthians and was honored by a triumphal arch (*Right*). No remains of this arch, however, have ever been found by archeologists.



The "lost" arch of Nero

With the multitude of Roman coins with architecture on them, all cannot be covered in this brief abstract. The emphasis that some emperors place on their architecture is evidenced by their coins. Nero and Augustus are only two of the many emperors whose buildings or monuments are immortalized on coins.



Obverse: Ancus Marcius Reverse: Aqua Marcia (L. Marcus Phillipus)

Moreover, the coins were not limited to emperors. The coin on the *left* was minted for L. Marcus Phillipus. It shows on the obverse the head of Ancus Marcius, from whom the Marcian gens claim to have been descended. This therefore makes the aqueduct a twofold monument. Not only was Ancus the first king to bring water to the Romans, but Q. Marcius Rex built an aqueduct aptly named the Aqua Marcia.⁴ The coin therefore serves not as a personal tribute to L. Marcus Phillipus, but to his ancestors and their deeds. This coin is not unique to the multitude of architectural

coins, which span from early mintings to the end of the Western Roman Empire. Through the turbulent history of Rome, the changing religions, the wars both won and lost, two things have remained constant: Roman architecture and the coins that immortalize it.

⁴ <http://www.beastcoins.com/Architecture/Aqueduct/aqueduct.htm>