Here’s My Card: Roman Provincial Coinage as Advertising for the Temple of Asclepius in Pergamum

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Ancient numismatics provides historians with a critically important source of information where there is often a lack of extant written records. Coinage from antiquity can yield clues about a wide variety of topics such as economic stability, civic pride, and political influence. The Mysian city of Pergamum in Asia Minor was a regional mint for bronze coinage of the Roman provinces. Its high status among the provincial cities was partly due to a large temple of Asclepius that attracted pilgrims from all reaches of the Empire, including Severan emperor Caracalla in 214. The popularity of Asclepius and his temples, along with an “endorsement” by Caracalla, created an opportunity for Pergamum to take advantage of their minting privileges. As was custom, Pergamum minted coinage that promoted their city, which typically featured images of Asclepius, the Asclepion, and the emperors’ visits to the city. While images of Asclepius and his temple had appeared on Pergamene coinage under the Antonine dynasty, it was not until after Caracalla’s visit that a clear pattern of Asclepion-specific imagery became the dominant theme of these coins. Because Pergamum was a major provincial mint, several factors existed that created a unique opportunity for the city to capitalize on Caracalla’s visit. Examination of the unique situation in Pergamum and its coinage from the reign of Marcus Aurelius through that of Elagabalus reveals that the Pergamenes sought to use their coinage as advertising. These coins advertised both the emperors and, after Caracalla’s visit, the Asclepion itself.

Asclepius was a popular deity in antiquity, and his temples were frequented by people from all walks of life. Asclepions, full temples devoted to Asclepius, were generally built just outside of a city, in areas with a strong connection to a freshwater spring and plentiful serpents. The origins of Asclepius are unclear. Sources differ on whether or not Asclepius was ever a real person, the matter of his divinity, and how his cult worship came to be. Generally, the evidence does point to Asclepius being a real person, most likely living just before the time of Homer.
based on his appearance and treatment in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.\(^1\) Some records found at the major Asclepions throughout the Mediterranean imply that Asclepius was not required to be physically present at the temple for healing purposes, which suggests that he was a demigod or even fully divine.\(^2\) Other sources treat Asclepius as a heroic, but mortal, figure.\(^3\) One important attribute ascribed to Asclepius is his attitude toward the poor.\(^4\) Typically, one was required to make some sort of gesture of thanks toward the god being addressed, lest the god reverse his actions. These gestures included donations of money, votives, food, wine, poetry, and songs.\(^5\) The poor were seldom able to afford to donate these gestures, but were welcomed into the Asclepion anyway, making pilgrimages to Asclepions a regular occurrence for all. Many Roman citizens looked to Asclepius, the god of healing, for healing and protection from illness, with the major Asclepions located in Epidaurus, Ephesus, Cos, Pergamum, and Corinth.\(^6\)

Pergamum was a city of the Mysian province in Asia Minor, near modern-day Bergama. The Pergamene Asclepion was known for its remarkable vipers, which were native to the area but uncommon elsewhere.\(^7\) The majority of the illnesses treated at this Asclepion were eye and mobility disorders.\(^8\) Pergamon was also the birthplace of the famed physician Galen (129-199 CE), who studied at the city’s Asclepion before embarking on his travels to Rome.\(^9\) Certainly, Aelius Aristides was a fan of the Pergamene Asclepion, and his reputation as an orator bolstered

\(^2\) Avalos, 38-41.
\(^3\) Avalos, 38-41.
\(^5\) Avalos, 65-70.
\(^6\) Avalos, 47.
\(^7\) Avalos, 62.
\(^8\) Avalos, 66-69.
the temple’s popularity. Caracalla also made a famous visit to the Pergamene Asclepion in 214 CE. During the Severan period, Pergamum was large enough to be the first city in Asia Minor that was awarded a third *neocorate*, an honor afforded to provincial cities that had built sizeable temples or started cults to the emperor. The mint at Pergamum, which had been in existence before Augustus, was awarded minting privileges again near the end of Septimius Severus’ reign and served as a major regional mint for the Asia Minor provinces.

Coin mints in antiquity functioned much like their modern counterparts in that metal discs of differing values for each type of coin are imprinted with specific imagery. In antiquity these blank discs, called flans, are heated and placed between two stamps, or dies. The upper die is struck, causing the heat-softened flan to be imprinted by the upper and lower die simultaneously. During the Imperial period, several provincial cities were allowed to strike bronze coinage, one of which, as mentioned before, was Pergamum. These cities had a certain amount of autonomy in coin design. The coin weight and obverse imagery were dictated by the emperor, but the reverse was relatively open for the cities to create their own designs. Cities often used images of patron gods or goddesses, temples, or mythical imagery. Cities that had been awarded *neocorate* status generally took this opportunity to brag about this honor. One very important theme that cities used was the depiction of visits from the emperor. This established a

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11 Herodian 4.8.2.
13 Kenneth Harl, *Coinage in the Roman Economy, 300 B. C. to A. D. 700*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 69-71; 76; 88; 107; 1109.
special relationship between the emperor and the city, further increasing the city’s status among the provinces. The Pergamene mint was no exception to these standard types of imagery. Looking back as far as the reign of Marcus Aurelius (r. 161-180 CE), the city’s coin imagery includes a wide variety of figures, such as Demeter, Zeus, Tyche, Heracles, Cybele, and serpents. Images for Asclepius are less common, and only one instance of an Asclepion occurs during the reign of Commodus. Of the coins recorded in the University of Oxford’s Roman Provincial Coin Online database, 24 Pergamene coins are attributed to Marcus Aurelius, with only seven of these bearing any imagery relating to Asclepius. Under Lucius Verus (r. 161-169 CE), three out of the eight coins cataloged depict Asclepian themes. Commodus’ Pergamene coinage (r. 180-192) does show a significant upward trend in showing images of Asclepius, but rarely in a way that shows him interacting with the god directly. Pergamene coinage does not start to appear again until the reign of Septimius Severus. Severan coinage from Pergamum contains scattered images of Asclepius, serpents, and the occasional Asclepion. It is under the reign of Caracalla, however, that imagery relating to Asclepius and Caracalla’s interaction with the god and his temple in particular increased significantly. The University of South Florida’s Severan Database Project lists 76 Pergamene coins dating from the joint reign of Septimius Severus and Caracalla, with 45 of these having some sort of reference to Asclepius. Caracalla had paid a visit to Pergamum and the Asclepion in 214. Many of these coins depict Caracalla holding statuettes of Asclepius,

14 Christopher Howgego, Ancient History from Coins (New York: Routledge, 1995), 85-86.
sacrificing before the temple, and lighting altars. Additional imagery associated with this visit includes representations of the three neocorate temples, which included the Asclepion.

It is clear that Caracalla’s visit was a source of pride for the Pergamenes. The images establish a special relationship between Pergamum and Caracalla, which meant that the city would enjoy material honors such as athletic games. After his visit in 214 CE, Caracalla awarded Pergamum with a third neocorate, extending the city’s influence among the provinces of Asia Minor. This honor, the first three-time neocorate city in Asia Minor, is reflected on coinage issued after his visit. Macrinus stripped Pergamum of her neocorate honors but they were ultimately restored after his death by Elagabalus, continuing to appear on coinage even under the reigns of Valerian and Gallienus.18

Because of the prominence of Pergamum’s mint, the need for more striking dies emerged. It is unavoidable that dies wear out and need replacement. In provincial mints, however, the dies were sometimes discarded before they were too worn to strike, and made their way to other provincial cities with mints. Konrad Kraft discusses the phenomenon of die-linkages in the Roman provinces of Asia Minor.19 Kraft states that because of a relatively small number of mints operating in Asia Minor during the Imperial period, larger mints often leased their dies to smaller mints.20 It is by this practice that Pergamene coinage can be shown more reliably to have a wide distribution pattern.

Die linkages are made through careful inspection and comparison of dies found in different locations. Some Pergamene obverse dies are unique in that the busts have shoulders that face the holder. In addition, wreaths, bows, and fabric edges are distinctive and appear in the

18 Burrell, 35.
20 Kraft, 14-15; 90.
same manner through the end of the Severan dynasty in 235 CE.\textsuperscript{21} According to the discovery of Pergamene dies in other cities, die linkages pertaining to the Pergamene mint extend throughout much of Asia Minor.\textsuperscript{22}

Kraft’s argument for die linkages between Pergamum and other provincial cities of Asia Minor provides a relatively wide distribution just for the new Pergamene coinage. Christopher Howgego adds that other factors contributing to the spread of provincial coinage can be attributed to the army and trade, two traditional means of distribution.\textsuperscript{23} Commodities in Asia Minor included the typical slave trade, in addition to other goods such as linen, wool, and marble.\textsuperscript{24} This means that a large mint such as the one at Pergamum would have a very wide distribution of coinage within the region. The imagery of this coinage would have been seen by thousands of provincial citizens.

The role of coinage in generating interest in the Asclepion was very important to the Pergamenes.\textsuperscript{25} The coinage simultaneously advertised the emperor and promoted the city’s achievements. It also served as a portable form of advertising, similar to a business card. The use of coinage in this way was not a new concept to the Romans; rulers of various empires had used coinage to promote themselves and their political and personal agendas for years.\textsuperscript{26} Merchants

\textsuperscript{21} Kraft, 38.
\textsuperscript{22} Kraft, 38-39.
\textsuperscript{23} Howgego, 102.
\textsuperscript{24} Burrell 182. For linen, see Dio Chrys. 34.21.3. For wool, see Strabo 12.8.16; Pliny, NH 8.190; Dio Chrys. 35.130. For marble, see Strabo 12.8.14.
\textsuperscript{25} Avalos, 91.
also used door signage and graffiti to peddle their wares and services. Advertisement on coinage primarily consists of propaganda and promotion while serving a further purpose of encouraging commercial exchange. Propaganda consists of the spread of governmentally-sanctioned information that intends to serve some form of political purpose. Promotional messages and images are meant to advance the importance or rank of something. Third, advertising seeks to influence the purchase or patronization of a product, service, or in our case, a temple.

On this coin’s reverse, Caracalla is standing on the left side of the field in front of a temple which contains a representation of Asclepius. A young boy is preparing to sacrifice a bull. The last 4 words of the legend read ΠΕΡΓΑΜΗΝΩΝ ΠΡΩΤΩΝ Γ ΝΕΟΚΟΡΩΝ, meaning “Pergamon First to have 3 Neocorates.” Promotion on this coin is seen in the inscription which refers to Pergamum as being the first city in Asia Minor to be awarded a third neocorate, boosting their reputation and power in the region. The propaganda aspect of this coin is in the image of Caracalla before the temple, with a bull about to be sacrificed. The Pergamenes are perpetuating Caracalla’s reverence for their Asclepion, which was intended to portray the

27 Sage, 204-207.
emperor in a positive way. And Caracalla certainly needed it: in the course of his travels through
the Eastern provinces prior to the Parthian War, Caracalla showed a pattern of extending good
will in order to hide his malicious agenda.\textsuperscript{28} Thankfully, Caracalla did not attack Pergamum
itself, but his stop in Pergamum preceded the start of this pattern, starting with his violent attack
on Alexandria, followed by the Parthians. These campaigns spanned from 214 to 217, which
gave the Pergamene coinage time to circulate regionally and spread the portrayal of Caracalla as
a “good guy”.\textsuperscript{29} The use of this coin as advertising is based in the incorporation of these aspects
in a portable, easily recognizable medium that indicated these aspects even to those who could
not read the Greek legend. The imagery in the field advertises the Asclepion in a way that
suggests that if it is good enough for Caracalla to visit, then the Asclepion must truly be special.
The three-\textit{neocorate} status certainly would have reinforced this idea. As mentioned before, the
history of the temple included Galen’s birth and training there. Aelius Aristides’ visit and
subsequent works which praised the Asclepion further enhanced the rich history of the
Pergamene temple. These unique features of the Pergamene Asclepion would have been
advertised both by word-of-mouth and the spread of coinage.

In conclusion, the intersection of several factors resulted in the ability of the Pergamenes
to use their coinage as an advertising medium. With the accession of Septimius Severus, minting
privileges were restored to Pergamum. The prominence of the mint at Pergamum necessitated the
production of striking dies. These dies, through a phenomenon known as die-linkage, spread out
over a large area of Asia Minor. This linkage led to more coinage bearing Pergamene imagery
being struck by other mints, whose coins, in turn, spread even further throughout Asia Minor.
When partnered with army movements and trade networks, the area of potential circulation for

\textsuperscript{28} Herodian 4.8.3-4.11.9.
\textsuperscript{29} For the entire account from the visit to Pergamum through the Parthian War, see Herodian 4.8.3-4.11.9.
Pergamene coinage was very large and resulted in a “customer base” of thousands. The fear of illness, and illnesses themselves, prompted many of the provincial citizens to seek help from Asclepius. Although the temple had existed for many years and was represented in coinage well before the Severan period, it was not until Caracalla visited in 214 that Pergamum made a regular habit of putting their Asclepion on coinage. Though several temples and shrines to Asclepius existed in Asia Minor as well as the Empire as a whole, the Pergamene Asclepion enjoyed an additional set of unique characteristics which, when advertised, would have given the citizens several very good reasons to visit Pergamum over other temple locations.
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