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### A STILL LIFE OIL PAINTED BY HENDRIK VANDER BORGH IN 1650 WITH ANCIENT COINS FROM DACIA: A HIGHLY EDUCATED WORK AND A POLITICAL MANIFESTO<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** An oil painting by Hendrik Vander Borgh and dated 1650 displays an assemblage of Roman vases (6 in clay and 2 in glass) and 11 ancient coins (3 Greek, 3 Roman Republican and 5 Roman Imperial), depicted with an astonishing accuracy, allowing a precise identification for most of them. From an archaeological point of view, such a grouping of coins can only come from ancient Dacia. It is argued here that the painting is organized in order to display a political manifesto for the good ruler, strong, but not autocratic. It may refer to the general uncertainty felt soon after the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) which ended the Wars of Religion, but it may also be more precisely related to Transylvania at a time when the young and adventurous George II Rákóczi was recklessly preparing to invade Poland, after having succeeded in 1648 his father George I, whose reign was remembered as a golden age for Transylvania.

**Keywords:** *Hendrik Vander Borgh, painting, ancient artefacts, Transylvania.*

François de CALLATAÿ

Université libre de Bruxelles  
Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes Paris  
Royal Library of Belgium  
callatay@kbr.be

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The painting (oil on copper, 24.1 x 35.4 cm) under discussion (Fig. 1) was sold without any mention of provenance or name of the painter by Bonhams in London on October 28<sup>th</sup> 2015 (lot 14). It is described as “German School 17<sup>th</sup> century. Ancient coins, glassware and pots on a table-top with an oil lamp”. The painting is dated and signed in the lower left: “HS\*\*ht pinxit 1650.” Estimated at £1,000-1,500, it was auctioned for £194,500, in a spirited competition between at least two bidders who knew about the artist. It came up for auction again in 2018 by Sotheby’s (New York), but this time with an attribution to Hendrik Van der Borgh the Elder and for an estimated price of \$100,000-150,000.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The author is most grateful to several colleagues and friends: Hadrien Rambach for having attracted his attention to this painting; Xavier Deru for the identification of clay vases and the rotary ring key; Raf Van Laere for the identification of the bracteates and the general literature on coins on painting; and Bernhard Weisser for the Renaissance Paduan with Septimius Severus. His greatest debt is to Andrew Burnett who communicated his own treatment of the painting which happily forced this author to substantially rewrite the paper. He is thrilled to finally publish a paper about Transylvania, the source of his family name and is grateful to Cristian Găzdac, whose enthusiasm made it possible to publish it so quickly in Transylvania. He is much indebted to Mary Lannin who one more time has revised the English of the manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> Sotheby’s (New York), 1 February 2018, lot 38.



Fig. 1. Oil painting dated 1650

### 1. DESCRIPTION

In the foreground, ten bronze and silver coins (see catalogue) are lying on a table around a central Roman glass *lacrymatorium*. On the right, a one-handed anthropomorphic orange clay jug (typical of the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> c. CE) ends with a head 'looking' below to the coins.<sup>3</sup> On the left middle ground is a simple portable wooden coin cabinet, apparently holding six trays. The last one is partly open and the viewer can see the first two rows of coins out of which three are recognizable (see catalogue). Atop this coin cabinet is another Roman glass vase (on the left) and a burning Roman oil lamp (on the right)<sup>4</sup> as well as a (door) key.<sup>5</sup> Behind is a Roman red glazed bowl in Samian ware (*terra sigillata*).<sup>6</sup> On the central middle ground is a round mortar also in Samian ware<sup>7</sup> while on the right is a metallescent black folded beaker (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE).<sup>8</sup> In the background are two common undecorated jugs.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See DÖVENER 1993 and DÖVENER 2000 for productions attributed to north western Europe (but noting the production of such vases in the Danube area).

<sup>4</sup> "Firmalampe" see LÖSCHKE 1919, type IX.

<sup>5</sup> I am very grateful to Xavier Deru for this identification. A convenient innovation was the tiny key that was a part of a finger ring. These were used for small storage and jewelry boxes. <https://www.historicallocks.com/en/site/h/other-locks/19-keys-and-locks-from-imperial-rome/the-first-keys/>

<sup>6</sup> DRAGENDORFF 1895, type 33.

<sup>7</sup> Ludowici 1905, type Si or DRAGENDORFF 1895, type 44.

<sup>8</sup> Late metallic vase (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE), type Niederbieber 33 (ÖLMANN 1914 and BRULET/VILVORDER/DELAGÉ 2010, 359).

<sup>9</sup> The one on the right is similar to those produced in the Eifel region (BRULET/VILVORDER/DELAGÉ 2010, 417).

### 2. THE PAINTER: HENDRIK VAN DER BORGHHT... BUT WHICH ONE?

When it was auctioned for the second time, the painting was attributed to Hendrik Van der Borghht the Elder (1583-1651 [the original Flemish spelling]) who was born in Brussels but left the country as so many others because of the Spanish Fury (Spanish Terror) to live first in Frankenthal, then in Frankfurt as noted in his portrait painted by his homonymous son, Hendrik Van der Borghht the Younger (1614-1676), and engraved by the well-known Wenceslaus Hollar (1607-1677) (Fig. 2).

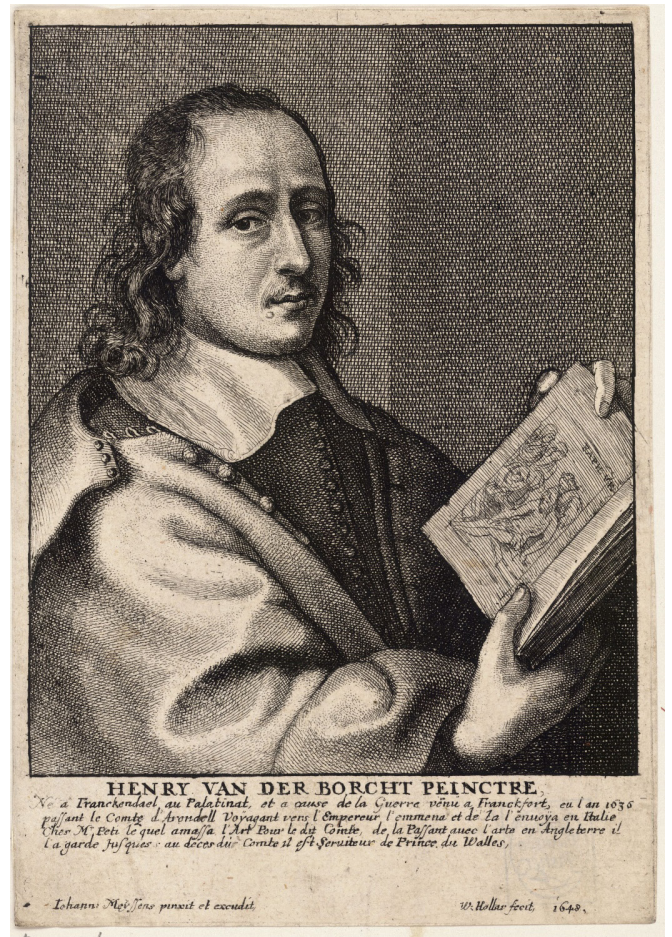
The son has painted the father holding a page with drawings of ancient coins, apparently both Greek and Roman (Fig. 3), and the legend further informs us that the father was a prominent antiquarian well connected with the Earl of Arundel (Thomas Howard, 14th Earl of Arundel, 1585-1646) to whom he provided medals and antiquities of various sorts.<sup>10</sup>

We do have an engraved portrait for the son as well (Fig. 4).

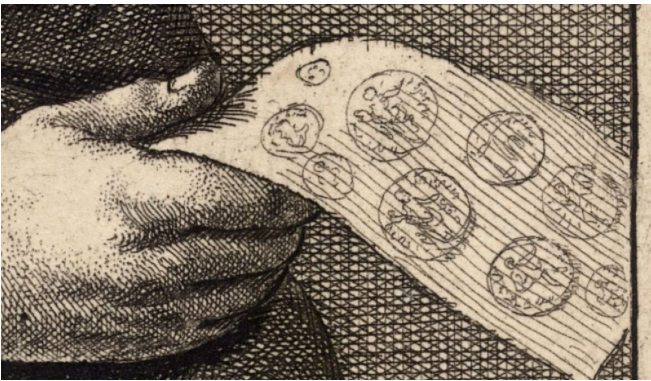
<sup>10</sup> The legends say: "De Bruxelles ou il naquit l'an 1583 d'où il fut emmene en Allemagne par les troubles de l'an 1586 & apres il at appris la peinture Chez Gilles de Valckenborgh; etant retourne d'Italie il a demeure a Franckendael jusques en l'an 1627 qu'il est venu demeurer a Francfort au Palatinat estant aussi un amateur admirable toute sorte de raritez, & antiquitez ainsi que le Conte d'Arondell le cherissoit pour les raritez & curiositez qu'il avoit eu de luy tant en medalles que peintures & autres sortes d'antiquitez."



**Fig. 2.** Portrait of Hendrik Van der Borghht the Elder painted by his son, engraved in 1650 by Wenceslaus Hollar and edited by Jan Meyssens (DE BIE 1662, 127).



**Fig. 4.** Portrait of Hendrik Van der Borghht the Younger painted by Jan Meyssens and engraved in 1648 by Wenceslaus Hollar (DE BIE 1662, 383).



**Fig. 3.** Detail of Fig. 2

He is presented as a painter holding a book opened to a page illustrating a work of Raphael (the legend RAPH. VR[BINVS]) and which had been purchased by the Earl of Arundel in Italy and then travelled with him to in England, where it remained with him until his death (*nb*: October 4<sup>th</sup> 1646) and thence to the collection of the Prince of Wales (Charles Stuart, 1600-1649).<sup>11</sup> The accompanying text provided by Jacques De Bie in his book about famous

<sup>11</sup> The text says: "Ne a Franckendael au Palatinat, et a cause de la Guerre venu a Frankfort en l'an 1636 passant le Comte d'Arondell voyageant vers l'Empereur l'emmena et de la l'envoya en Italie chez M. Peti le quel amassa l'art pour le dit Comte, de la passant avec l'arte en Angleterre, il l'a garde jusques au deces du Comte, il est serviteur du Prince du Walles."

Flemish painters repeats how Hendrik Van der Borghht the Elder was praised for his knowledge of antiquity,<sup>12</sup> while the Younger – who ended as the antiquarian of Karl Ludwig, the Palatine Elector – was admired for his painting skills.

We know at present a set of four paintings of a similar manner and topic: they are all of small format and painted on copper. They all represent various Greek and Roman antiquities laying on a table: one is at the Hermitage (Fig. 5), another at the Historisches Museum in Frankfurt (Fig. 6), a third was sold by Christie's in 1979 and is signed "HV Borcht"<sup>13</sup> and the last one is the one studied here, dated 1650 and signed "HS\*\*cht pinxit 1650."<sup>14</sup>

Some identifiable objects appear on more than one painting, reinforcing the idea that they have been produced

<sup>12</sup> De Bie 1662, 128: "hoe menig arm jongman die van een klein nederig geslagt geboren is wordt om zijn gees ten de byzondere gratie in eenige wetenschap te plegen bij koningen en prinzen niet opgetrochten en de bemint geldig Hendrik vander Borcht ook van den Hertog Arundel om zijn ervaren wetenschap ontallijke weldaden heft ontvangnen die van goeden ouderdom gestorben is toch het jaer aan mij onbekend." [Many a young man of humble birth is exalted by a king for his wit and ability in a specific art, but none more than Hendrik vander Borcht by the Duke of Arundel. He received many favours for his erudition and died in old age although I do not know the year.] (English translation by Michiel Verweij).

<sup>13</sup> Most coins have been identified by WELU 1983, 24.

<sup>14</sup> As such, the name seems misspelt but the quality of the available photograph doesn't allow to confirm or inform us that one actually reads "HS" and not "HV" as in the one sold by Christie's.



**Fig. 5.** Hendrik Van der Borcht, *Stilleven van antieke beeldjes en penningen*, oil on copper, 34.5cm. St Petersburg, Hermitage Museum (Inv. ΓΘ-2445)



**Fig. 6.** Hendrik VanderBorght, *Stilleben mit Sammlungsgegenständen*, oil on copper, 20.1 x 25.7 cm. Frankfurt, Historisches Museum (Inv. Pr352)

by the same hand and suggesting that these objects are not fantasy pieces, but rather belong to a specific collector's cabinet, with the one of Hendrik Van der Borcht the Elder himself as the most natural option (Table 1).

If we can presume that they were all produced by the same artist, who signed "HV Borcht", the question naturally arises, which Hendrik Van der Borcht, the father or the son?

As we know that the son drew ancient coins by hundreds and more likely by thousands, Andrew Burnett is inclined to identify him as the author of the paintings.<sup>15</sup> He

<sup>15</sup> See BURNETT 2020, 357-360; 1440-1443 (Appendix 19. The coin drawings and paintings of the Younger Henrick Van der Borcht). The Frankfurter bibliophile Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach (1683-1734) owned four numismatic books (Occo, Erizzo, ...) enriched by hundreds of drawings of coins made by Hendrik Van der Borcht (on this, see FABRICIUS 1712, 53; 64; BANDURI [edited by Fabricius] 1719, 177; three of these embellished books are mentioned in the sale of his library, see UFFENBACH



**Fig. 7.** Hendrik Van der Borcht, *A Collection of Ancient Objects*, oil on copper, 25.4 x 21.3 cm. Christie's 1979 (signed "HV Borcht", provenance D.H. Cevat, London, circa 1958)

reports two letters the son sent from Amsterdam to John Evelyn in 1650, the precise year of the painting, where he mentions as coming from Germany "water colours or miniature" with medals of various metals mixed with engraved gems, adding "the variety of medals with their diversity of colours do show fine. I never did see any before done in this way".<sup>16</sup> He also notes that the father was an old man of 63 years in 1650.

On another hand, the commentators have so far nearly unanimously assigned these paintings to the father, who was known to have possessed a cabinet of antiquities and have painted other types of still lifes (which was unknown for the son).<sup>17</sup> He was also more consistently described as a lover of antiquities, as illustrated by his engraved portrait or by what Horace Walpole wrote about the two.<sup>18</sup> Two minor additional

1735, 23; 32). And in a letter to Fabricius dated of 13 August 1714, he made explicit it was the work of the son, not the father (see SCHELHORN 1753, 28-29, BURNETT 2020, 1440-1441 and FINA ID 10699).

<sup>16</sup> The first letter on 10 February 1650 (FINA ID) and the second on 11 May 1650 (FINA ID). See HARDING 1996, 39-44; BURNETT 2020, 1442. These letters are puzzling since Hendrik the Younger is clearly amazed by a new kind of representation foreign to him (and hence also to his father).

<sup>17</sup> See Zehl 1995 and, among others, the Wikipedia notice for Hendrik Van der Borcht the Elder ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hendrik\\_van\\_der\\_Borcht\\_the\\_elder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hendrik_van_der_Borcht_the_elder)) (accessed on 26.01.2021), the Hermitage website (<https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/01.+Paintings/38739/>) (accessed on 26.01.2021), or the notice by Julia Ellinghaus on the website for the Historisches Museum in Frankfurt (<https://bildersammlung-prehn.de/de/prehn/stilleben-mit-sammlungsgegenst%C3%A4nden>) (accessed on 26.01.2021).

<sup>18</sup> WALPOLE 1762, 81 ("many curious pieces of painting and antiquities, especially medals, the Earl bought of Henry Vanderborcht a painter of Brussels, who lived at Frankendal, and whose son Henry, Lord Arundel finding at Frankfort, sent to Mr Petty then collecting for him in Italy, and afterwards kept in his service as long as he lived").

Table 1. Shared objects in the set of the four paintings by Hendrik Van der Borgh

Object	St Petersburg	Frankfurt	Christie's	Bonhams
Female seated sculpture holding her r. breast	-	X	X	-
Pan's grimacing head on a pedestal	X	X	-	-
Lacrymatorium	-	X	X	X
Bowl in <i>terra sigillata</i> (Dragendorff 44)	X	-	-	X
Red/white cameo with jugate busts	-	X	X	-
Red/white cameo of a veiled woman r.	-	X	X	-
White cameo of a helmeted bust turned l.	X	-	X	-
Tetradrachm of Philip II	-	X	X	-
Gold aureus of Divus Caesar	X	-	X	-
Gold aureus of Faustina	X	X	-	-
Renaissance bronze fantasy with Hercules	X	X	-	-
Total	6	8	7	2

elements can be add favouring the father: a) the Frankfurt location of one of the four surviving paintings (the father was living there in 1650 while his son has left the city many years before) and b) the central place of a bracteates issued in Frankfurt on the Bonhams painting (there is another of the German bracteates on the Hermitage painting). All in all, the most likely scenario is that these four paintings were painted by Hendrik Van der Borgh the Elder, who is likely to have taken advantage of his own collection.

**3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY**

The Bonhams/Sotheby's painting is the most singular of the group. There are no sculptures, no cameos, no gold coins, and the general atmosphere is much less luxurious than for the three others. With all these undecorated vases, it is by far the most "archaeological" composition and as not a single of the 13 depicted coins is reproduced elsewhere, it may be relevant to first address the question: is there any chance that the painter had represented a single find? In



Fig. 8. Clay vessels from the Roman period, Germany 1885<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Clay vessels from the Roman period, from the left a bottle, drinking cup, an urn, a bowl, a small clay lamp, a large jug, cup-shaped jar, and a mug, Germany, digitally improved reproduction of a woodcut publication in the year 1885. See <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/clay-vessels-from-the-roman-period-from-the-left-a-bottle-news-photo/985705872> (accessed on 26.01.2021).

particular, doubt arises since the two vases in the background are common and unlikely to enhance the reputation of a collector. And indeed, for the most part, this assemblage of vases and artefacts looks typical of a Gallo-Roman funerary context at large, similar to a print dated 1885 of a deposit

found in Germany (Fig. 8).

In theory, all these vases, being in clay or glass, as the oil lamp could come from a single funerary deposit. But there are chronological discrepancies with vases. In particular, the metallescent black folded beaker (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE) and the anthropomorphic jug (typical of the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> c. - see Fig. 9) – are dated a couple of centuries later than the *terra sigillata*.



1a: vue de face

**Fig. 9.** Anthropomorphic Roman jug dated 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> c. CE. (Boulogne-sur-Mer. Château-Musée no. 846/5 – DÖVENER 1993, 99)

On the other hand, there could be no question that coins belong to different monetary periods. This is enough to eliminate the hypothesis of a single find.

A second question is about the level of intentionality, which itself refers to the level of education of the painter or his patron. Are we looking to a mere description of objects or is it something more with extra meaning? We shall see that the coins bring a definitive answer to that question but, even without them, there are enough evidence to prove intentionality.

First and generally speaking, the painting appears as well-constructed according to the classical canons of pictorial composition with a central perspective coming from the back along the lateral side of the wooden coin cabinet on the left and the row of vases on the right. The flame of the oil lamp gives additional emphasis to these vanishing lines while, prominently displayed in the central foreground, shining silver coins attract the immediate look of the spectator, with the verticality of the central glass *lacrymatorium* bringing it above to the center. While not exceptional, this composition suggests a professional painter well trained in his art.

Second, this painting is not lacking in elements which have allegorical meanings (which is not true for the other paintings attributed to Hendrik Van der Borcht):

1. The flame (of the oil lamp) is a classical device to represent “truth” or “hope”,

2. An impassive head overlooking the stage evokes the sphinx and the unknown of the future, especially if there is a imagined grid of time, from left to right. The gaze of the head looking down to the coins accentuates the idea of something to be seen and to be discovered. As if the painter was saying: “look carefully at the center!”
3. The central place of the *lacrymatorium* is very remarkable. These glass *lacrymatoria* often found in Roman tombs were long thought to be bottles in which the parents of the deceased had dropped their tears (hence their names). As a matter of fact, they most likely contained ointments used in funeral ceremonies. It is likely that the painter took advantage of the modern and now dismissed interpretation to signify the regrets of the past. One may even venture to interpret the black shadow of the *lacrymatorium* projected diagonally to the right (here taken as the future) as an additional mark of pessimism in addition to the general funerary atmosphere.

Fourth, and enough in itself to decide about the intentionality of the whole, is the representation of a typical Roman rotary ring door key (Fig. 10)<sup>20</sup> at the most symbolic place, near the flame of the lamp and cantilevered on the edge of the wooden coin cabinet, in between thus the past (in the box) and the present (on the table). It is literally a painting with a key where the past illuminates the present<sup>21</sup> and one understands that the painter has preferred to sign with initials only.



**Fig. 10.** Roman rotary ring door key

Let’s now consider the coins which form the most distinctive aspect of the painting and provides its meaning.

#### 4. NUMISMATIC COMMENTARY

Coins on paintings have been the topic a several recent studies.<sup>22</sup> It is known as a speciality of the Low

<sup>20</sup> PACE 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Although we should refrain to over-interpret, the nature of the two vases on the wooden coin cabinet may have been carefully selected too with a glass vase producing reflections (of the past on the present) and a cup in Samian ware as the embodiment of the brilliant past.

<sup>22</sup> For coins on paintings, see e.g. KUHN 2005; HAMON 2010; HOLGEN

Countries, beginning with Quentin Metsys (1466-1530) and Marinus van Reymerswale (1490-1546), who specialized in representing seated couples holding money on a table, then – and more significantly for us here – Frans Francken the Young (1581-1642) who made his career with views of collector’s cabinets.<sup>23</sup> Philippe Hamon has calculated that, out of 1,042 paintings produced in the Low Countries during the 17<sup>th</sup> c., 27 (= 2.6%) represent coins, among which 15 (out of 114 = 13%) for the single genre of the vanities, and is the one where ancient coins are the most represented. The reader will find at the end of this study the enumerated catalogue of the 13 coins that are represented. (see Annex 1). But, before we enter into the details of the numismatic commentary, three general comments could be made:

1. Coins have been painted with an astonishingly high level of accuracy at a size near to their real size (1:1).<sup>24</sup> Precision is so high that it gives the feeling that it would be possible in some cases to identify the original die. This level of accuracy is far superior to the average and not superseded by any other painting known to me. This says something of course about the technical skills of the artist. But even more so about the fact that coins are the real topic of the painting and not simply there as part of a conventional kit of artefacts signifying vanity and the passing of time.
2. The painter doesn’t know ancient Greek since he misspelled the only two legends he had to reproduce (no. 2: ΗΡΗΚΛΕΟΥ / ΣΩΤΕΚΩ[ΙΕ?]) for ΗΡΑΚΛΕΟΥ / ΣΩΤΗΡΟΣ; no. 13: ΒΑΣΙΛΣ for ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣ). But he apparently knows Latin which was the common situation at the time for well educated people.



Fig. 11. The portable wooden coin cabinet

2016.

<sup>23</sup> MARR 2010.

<sup>24</sup> The late Hellenistic tetradrachm in the name of the Thasians for example is c. 31 mm large on the painting which is in line with the real coins (most between 30 and 33 mm).

3. The portable wooden coin cabinet on the left side is a rarely represented object (Fig. 11). However, a somewhat similar portable coin cabinet famously appears in 1601 on the frontispiece given by Abraham Gorlaeus (van Goorle) to his book: *Dactyliothecae, seu annulorum sealarium quorum apud priscos tam Graecos quam Romanos usus ex ferro, aere, argento et auro* (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12. Frontispiece of Abraham Gorlaeus, 1601



Fig. 13. Frontispiece of Abraham Gorlaeus, 1605 (detail)

Depicted here in the shape of a book provided with a clasp, it contains three trays with four coins per row (Fig. 13).

### 3.1. The three Greek coins (nos. 1-3)



**Fig. 14.** The three Greek silver tetradrachms

Occupying a central position around the *lacrymatorium*, the three Greek silver tetradrachms naturally capture the eye of the spectator by the white spot they form in the center of the composition (Fig. 14). This is a most peculiar set of coins which can only be found in the modern territory of Romania (or possibly also Hungary) and is totally unique for painting.

There are two tetradrachms imitative of Philip II struck by the Celts of the Danube, one of the so-called Baumreiter type issued in the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE (no. 1),<sup>25</sup> and another, extremely rare, issued later in the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE (no. 2).<sup>26</sup> In both cases, the painter has chosen to represent the obverse, the stylized head of Philip II. Occupying the real center of the foreground, there is also a first wave imitation of a late Hellenistic tetradrachm in the name of the Thasians struck ca 90-60 BCE with a monogram (likely to be the most common one: MH) in the inner l. field (no. 3).<sup>27</sup> Here the reverse has been preferred to the obverse and the horizontal orientation of the type seems to indicate that the important element is the legend HPAKAEOY.

### 3.2. The three Roman Republican denarii (nos. 4-6)

The three coins pictured in the wooden coin cabinet



**Fig. 15.** The three Roman Republican denarii

are all Roman Republican denarii (nos. 4-6) (Fig. 15). They belong to issues struck by L. Memmius (109-108 BCE)<sup>28</sup>, Q. Titius (90 BCE),<sup>29</sup> and C. Longinus (60 BCE).<sup>30</sup> These are three large issues for which the database *Coinage of the*

<sup>25</sup> GÖBL 1973, no. 129.

<sup>26</sup> GÖBL 1973, no. 244.

<sup>27</sup> PROKOPOV 2006.

<sup>28</sup> RRC, 304/1.

<sup>29</sup> RRC, 341/2.

<sup>30</sup> RRC, 413/1.

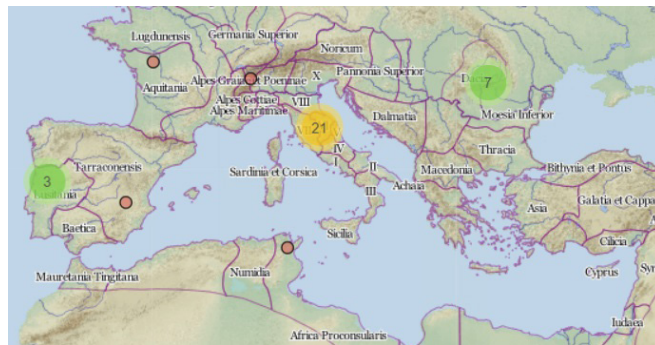
*Roman Republic Online* (CRRO)<sup>31</sup> gives the following results:

RRC, 304/1: 56 objects, 138 hoards

RRC, 341/2: 78 objects, 150 hoards

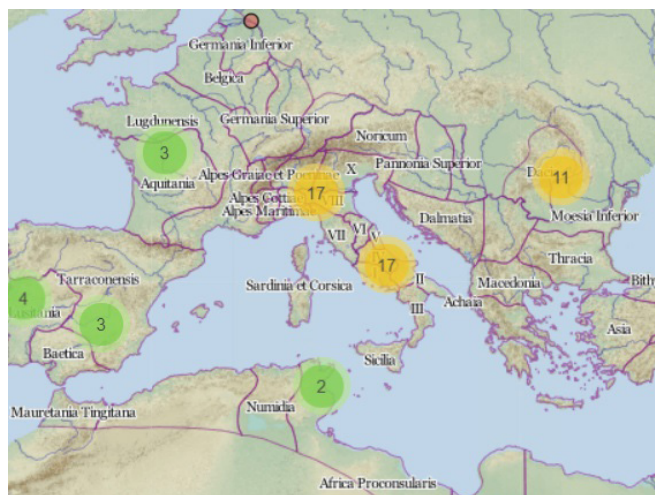
RRC, 413/1: 96 objects, 93 hoards

There are 35 recorded hoards by the database *Coin Hoards of the Roman Republic* (CHRR) which combine the three issues, out of which 7 are in Romania (Fig. 16) which comes second after Italy as the most likely provenance for such an assemblage.



**Fig. 16.** Distribution map of hoards containing RRC, 304/1, 341/2 and 413/1 (<http://numismatics.org/chrr/>) (accessed on 26.01.2021).

The same situation is obtained if taking only RRC 341/2 and 413/1 with 60 hoards out of which 11 found in Romania (Fig. 17). Conversely, it should be observed that such combinations are so far not known for Bulgaria or other Balkan countries.



**Fig. 17.** Distribution map of hoards containing RRC, 341/2 and 413/1 (<http://numismatics.org/chrr/>) (accessed on 26.01.2021).

Considering the selected types, one finds from left to right one veiled head turned left, a central Pegasus and a simple head turned right. One wonders if there is not here a possible representation of the time: past (the veiled head turned left), present (the rich figure of Pegasus, often a symbol of wisdom and fame from the Middle Ages to modern times) and future (a head looking at the message

<sup>31</sup> <http://numismatics.org/crro/> (accessed on 26.01.2021).

provided by the coins on the table), near the rotary ring door key, which by its shadow is an invitation to take advantage of the lessons of the past.

**3.3. The five Roman Imperial bronze silver coins (no. 7-11)**



**Fig. 18.** The five Roman Imperial bronze coins

Contrasting with the whiteness of the Greek silver coins, the five Roman imperial coins are in bronze and all of rather large format (Fig. 18). Although very precise identifications are not always possible due to the commonness of certain types, one recognizes:

no. 7: a sestertius with the head of Divus Augustus,

no. 8: a restitution as issued under Caligula with the letters S C (37-38 CE)

no. 9: a sestertius with the type of Spes and the letter S. C. which must have been struck under Vespasianus or Domitianus

no. 10: a dupondius with Felicitas Publica issued about the same time, either by Titus, Vespasianus, Domitianus from 73 to 76 CE (73-76 CE, no. 10)

These four large Imperial bronze coins belong all to a short period of time (ca. 14 CE-76CE). All four conspicuously show the letters S. C. (for Senatus Consultum). These letters are not rare on Roman imperial issues at that time but it is significant that all the coins bear the SC and, as they obviously convey a political message, this is a strong argument to establish the high level of selection and thus of intentionality of the scene.

It should also be noticed that, while the portraits on Greek silver coins are looking right (which is the dominant direction for portraits on obverses), the opposite is true for the bronze Roman coins which are looking left. This is admittedly the dominant direction for types on the reverse, but not for emperors on the obverse. Again, we have to decide about the possible intentionality for having portrayed the head of Augustus here looking left contrary to the majority of cases.

At last, the two reverse types are Spes (no. 9) and Felicitas (no. 10). Once more, these two themes are not rare but considering the full Roman Imperial coinage at that time, it looks too much as a happy coincidence, especially since these highly symbolic themes naturally resonate with the democratic message conveyed by the letters S. C. It doesn't require a great imagination to figure out that these Roman coins are here standing in as a manifesto for as democratic a government as possible (a true democracy in 1650 is out of reach in these areas) bringing prosperity. The head of Augustus, the 'good emperor', adds to this hypothesis.



**Fig. 19.** The Roman medallion of Septimius Severus

The large (Paduan) medallion of Septimius Severus is lying partly in the shadow in the left foreground (Fig. 19). It seems to stand apart looking at the Felicitas just in front of him. It is not unlikely (although unprovable) that the supersize of the coin may stand here for the grandeur of the Roman Empire in general.

**3.5. A German bracteates of Friedrich Barbarossa (no. 12)**



**Fig. 20.** The bracteate of Friedrich I Barbarossa issued at Frankfurt

Alone of its kind as the only modern coin, located in the mid-foreground before the *lacrymatorium* and engaged in a visual dialogue with the name of Herakles and the gaze of Ipsikrateia (see next), the facing bust of the emperor Friedrich Babarossa (1122-1190) is the only one to look at the spectator (Fig. 20). Considering the accumulating arguments offered so far for a high level of intentionality displayed by the painter, there can be little doubt that this is the key coin for the understanding of the whole composition. The fact that this bracteate has been struck in Frankfurt, the city where Hendrik Van der Borghht the Elder lived at the time, is – as already noticed – a key element to attribute the painting to him. Considering that such an item only circulated locally with near zero chance to reach Romania is an additional argument to argue in favour of an allegorical painting.<sup>33</sup>

In 1650, two years thus after the Treaty of Münster and the end of the Wars of Religion, there should be a European aspiration for a strong, large and peaceful government. Having died in Silifke (Turkey) and not involved in the Carpathian area, Barbarossa is here more taken as a past embodiment of such a power, with Augustus near him as a past model of the 'good emperor'. It looks then very significant that in both cases – a device used nowhere else – the portraits are partly covering the left side of the

<sup>32</sup> BERGER 1993, 296, no. 2356.

<sup>33</sup> The other possible explanation, in case of a mere description of artefacts, being a reference to the origin of the collector.



**Fig. 21.** Friedrich Barbarossa and Augustus partly covering Roman coins with the letters S C

Roman coins displaying the letters S C. (Fig. 21).

It seems difficult to escape the conclusion that such a repeated device is used to underline the necessity for a strong emperor to be backed by some democratic forces.

**3.6. A Renaissance fantasy of the Pontic queen Ipsicrateia by Valerio Belli (no. 13)**



**Fig. 22.** Renaissance fantasy of Ipsicrateia, queen of Bosphorus by Valerio Belli

And last in chronological order is the Renaissance fantasy or re-creation<sup>34</sup> of Ipsicrateia by Valerio Belli (Fig. 22).<sup>35</sup> Ipsicrateia is remembered as the last wife of Mithridates Eupator, the one who cut her own hair, fought as a man, and briefly reigned in the Bosphorus kingdom, north of the Black Sea. The presence of that coin well in the center of the painting also raises several questions:

-Was the painter aware that this is a modern fantasy? Possibly, but probably not (there are other 'Paduans' in the other paintings); this is of minor importance for his purpose.

-Is there a chance that such a modern fantasy produced in Italy in the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> c. reached Romania, the place from which coins seem to come? A small chance.

-If not, was it intentionally chosen as a type as a geographical marker (the Black Sea) for his painting? Probably, yes. The coincidence would be very puzzling otherwise since Ipsicrateia is the only historical figure to come from this area among the many dozens of portraits created as Renaissance fantasies.

-Is there any gender issue beyond the fact that this is the only female portrait? Difficult to establish. She looks

<sup>34</sup> CALLATAÏ 2014.

<sup>35</sup> ATTWOOD 2003, no. 377.

insistently at the portrait of Friedrich Barbarossa. Is she there as the 'good queen' supporting the 'good emperor' or as a geographical allegory for the Black sea area expecting a good government? I would favour the second hypothesis, but who knows?

-Is it conceivable that the painter is also subtly playing with the hidden reverse, whose most common type shows the legend EYKH (for "Good fortune") (Fig. 23)? It is not impossible that he played such a trick for himself, but he could not reasonably expect such a degree of knowledge outside of a few people.



**Fig. 23.** Renaissance fantasy by Valerio Belli (ATTWOOD 2003, no. 377).

**5. Conclusion**

There should be no question that this is a painting with a key and different levels of reading, produced by an artist mastering the rules of his art, playing with composition and allegorical meanings, selecting appropriate elements and connecting them through visual dialogues. Coins in particular have been selected along four criteria at least – time, metal, theme and direction (left/right) – in order to constitute homogeneous sets. As a result, Greek and Roman coins are articulated along a quadruple grid (Table 2):

**Table 2.** Quadruple grid between Greek and Roman coins

	Greek	Roman
Metal	Silver	Bronze
Direction	Right	Left
Position	Behind	Before
Value	Barbarian	Senate

Surrounded by converging gazes (the plastic head of the jug, Ipsicrateia, and Septimius Severus), the central couple "Friedrich Barbarossa-Herakles" is the focal point of the composition.

The most likely interpretation of the full scene appears then as a political manifesto (the burning oil lamp on the left stands as an image for "truth" but also for "hope" and the "Spes" on the right is explicit) for the coming of a strong (Herakles) ruler, much like the late, lamented (*lacrymatorium*) Friedrich Barbarossa and Augustus, whose action, tempered by democratic forces (the Roman Senate taken as an example placed before Greek rulers), will bring prosperity (Felicitas).

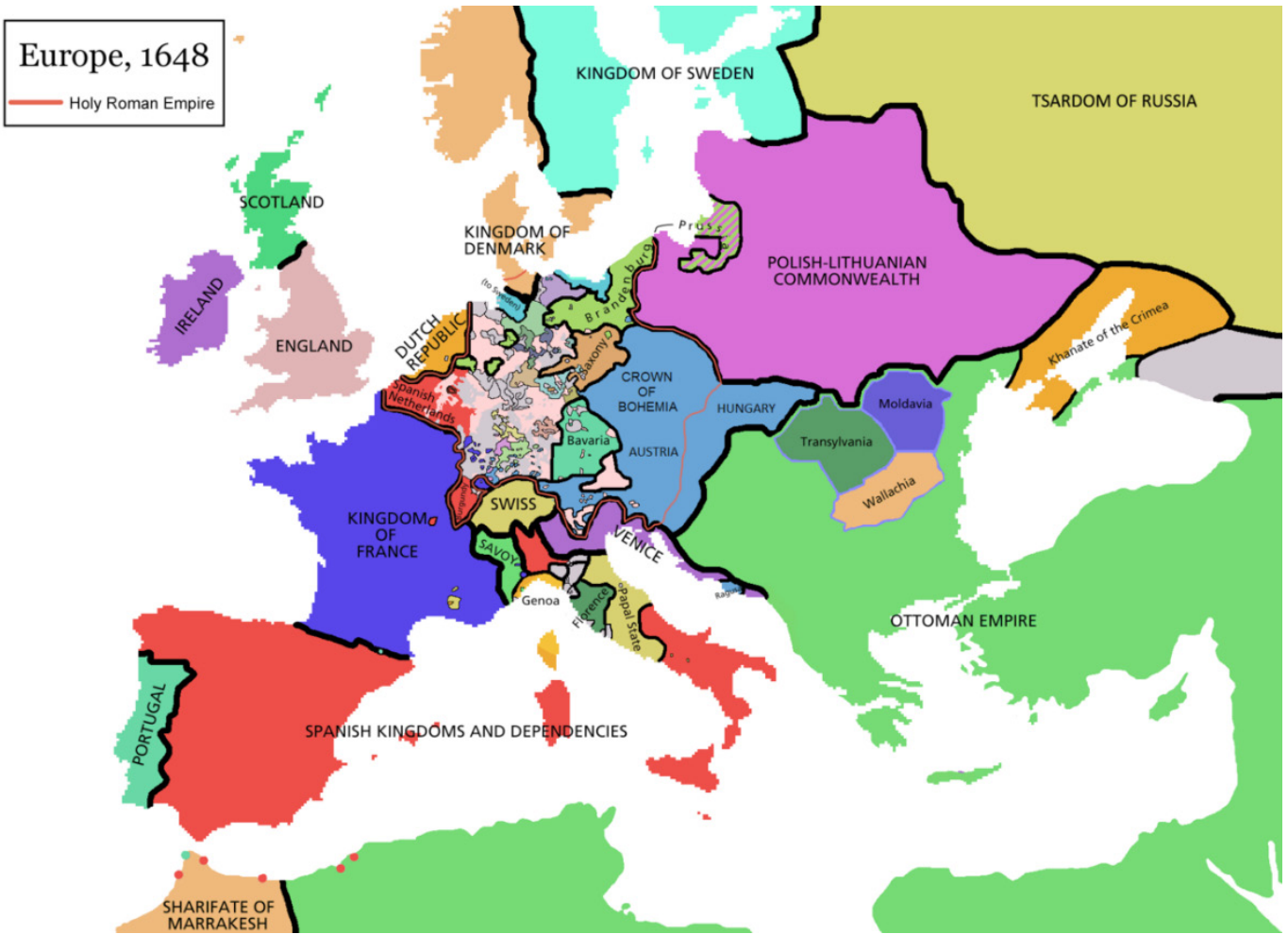


Fig. 24. Political map of Europe in 1648 ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Romania](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Romania)) (accessed on 26.01.2020).

With a pinch of wishful thinking because of my Transylvanian roots, I dare to push the hypothesis further. This painting markedly differs from the others by not being a mix of coins coming from various provenances in all metals. Instead, coins seem to repeatedly refer to the same area: Dacia. This is clearly the case for the imitations of Philip II tetradrachms issued by the Celts of the Danube (which can only originate from there); Ipsicrateia was the only queen available in metal which could refer to the area *lato sensu*; and the set of Roman Republican denarii is also typical of this area, although admittedly not too strong an argument. Assuming that the painting was done in Frankfurt in 1650 and having demonstrated its remarkable level of intentionality, one wonders if such a strong tropism could be coincidental.

Modern Romania was then divided into different parts (Fig. 24). The illustrated coins are the most likely to come from the Principality of Transylvania, a tributary of the Ottoman Empire, ruled by the young George II Rákóczi (1621-1660) (Fig. 25) who succeeded his father George I Rákóczi (1593-1648) in 1648. The leader of the Protestant faction in Hungary, George I Rákóczi improved education and culture and installed a regime of religious liberties in the territories in which he was confirmed by the Peace of Linz, signed in 1645. His reign is remembered as a golden age for Transylvania. In contrast, his son George II Rákóczi, who married Zsófia Báthory (= Ipsicrateia?), was barely installed

on the throne, before he attempted to invade Poland, which ultimately proved to be a catastrophic adventure.



Fig. 25. Taler of Georg Rakoczi II, 1650 in Nagybanya (today Baia Mare). © Rauch, Auction 111, 3 Dec. 2020, lot 1212

Although there can be no definitive assurance, this historical background provides a suitable context for such a painting by playing on two registers: at first sight, the mere description of a private collection of archaeological artefacts, and for those who are taking the time to look (as they are encouraged to do) a reflection on the good ruler, at a time when the change of reign made it fearful that the son did not have the wisdom of the father.

But what is certain is that in 1650, Hendrik Van der Borghst painted a composition whose nearly every element is highly significant both taken in isolation or together, by

expressing the values, hopes and fears along a timeline. There are no murders to discover as in *The Flanders Panel*, the brilliant novel of Arturo Pérez-Reverte (Fig. 26),<sup>36</sup> but there is a sophisticated intrigue, and blood will come.

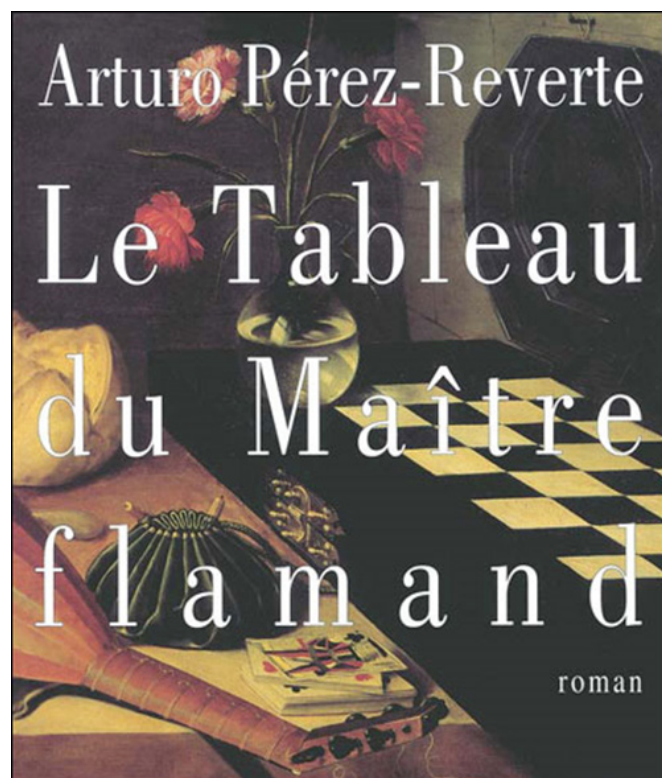


Fig. 26. Cover of *Le Tableau du Maître flamand* by Arturo Pérez-Reverte

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<sup>36</sup> Originally published as *La tabla de Flandes*, Madrid, Alfaguara, 1990.

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## ANNEX 1. CATALOGUE OF THE COINS

### Greek coins

1. Tetradrachm imitative of Philip II by the eastern Celts (3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE – GÖBL 1973, 129)



*Obv.* Bearded head of Zeus to r. Dotted border.



© Gorny & Mosch Giessener Münzhandlung, Auction 232, 5 Oct. 2015, lot 15 (14.05g)

*Comments:* this type of head belong to the Baumreiter type struck by the Eastern Celts in Dacia. The laurel leaves at the back of the head are changed to hair.

2. Tetradrachm imitative of Philip II by the Celts of the Danube (2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE – GÖBL 1973, 244)



*Obv.:* Stylized head of Zeus to r.



© Felzmann, Auction 150, 4 Nov. 2014, lot 10 (12.62g)

3. Late Hellenistic tetradrachm in the name of the Thasians (c. 90-60 BCE – PROKOPOV 2006)



Rev. ΗΡΑΚΛΕΟΥ (here ΗΡΗΚΛΕΟΥ) ΣΩΤΗΡΟΣ (here ΣΩΤΕΚΩΙΕ?) ΘΑΣΙΩΝ. Standing nude Herakles facing, holding his club in his r. and with the lion skin on his l. shoulder. Monogram in the inner l. field.



© Neville Numismatics Ltd., Auction 58, 14 June 2020, lot 137

*Comment:* from the shape of the type, the painted tetradrachm belongs to the first wave of imitations.

## Roman Republican coins

4. Denarius of L. Memmius, Rome (109-108 BCE – RRC, 304/1)



*Obv.* Male head r., wearing oak wreath. Dotted border.



© Numismatik Naumann Auction 42, 3 Apr. 2016, lot 628 (3.73g)

5. Denarius of Q. Titius, Rome (90 BCE – RRC, 341/2)



*Rev.* Pegasus springing r. Below: tablet inscribed Q·TITI. Linear circle.



© Roma Numismatics, E-Sale 76, 5 Nov. 2020, lot 886 (3.91g)

6. Denarius of Cassius Longinus, Rome (60 BCE – RRC, 413/1)



Obv. Diademed and veiled head of Vesta l. In field l.: L; in field r.: dish.



© Numismatica Ars Classica > Auction 100, 29 May 2017, lot 1527 (3.85g)

**Roman Imperial coins**

7. Restitution *dupondius* under Caligula with the letters S C (Rome, 37-41 CE – RIC 56)



Obv. DIVVS AVGVSTVS. Radiate head of Augustus to l. Letters S C in the field.



© Roma Numismatics, e-sale 67, 6 Feb. 2020, lot 6788

*Comment:* although barely visible, the letters S C must appear in the field, since the only possibility for such a type are the *dupondii* struck under Caligula in Rome in the years 37-41 CE.

8. Restitution *as* under Caligula with the letters S C (Rome, 37-38 CE – RIC 35)



Rev. POT CC CAESAR AVG [...]. Letters S C in the middle. Dotted border.



© Dix Noonan Webb Ltd, Auction 177, 3 June 2020, lot 480 (11.28g)

9. *Sestertius* with *Spes* and the letters S C (Rome, under Titus or Domitianus, late 70s or early 80s)



Rev. Letters S. (in field l.) and C (in field r.). *Spes* standing left. holding a flower in her r. and her mantle behind in her l. Dotted border.



© Inasta, Auction 85, 9 Dec. 2019, lot 283 (22.35g)

10. *Dupondius* with Felicitas Publica (Rome under Vespasianus, Titus, or Domitianus, 70s or 80s CE)



Rev. FELICITAS PVBLICA. Letters S (in the inner filed l.) and C (in the inner field r.).  
Felicitas standing to l., holding caduceus in her r. hand and a cornucopia in her l. hand. RIC 504



© Roma Numismatics, Auction XX, 29 Oct. 2020, lot 500 (13.63g)

*Comment:* similar reverse types have been struck in Rome by Vespasianus, Titus or Domitianus from 73 to 76 CE.

11. Renaissance imitation (Paduan made after Giovanni da Cavino) of a large medallion of Septimius Severus (Rome, 196 CE –for the original see GNECCHI 1912, 74, no. 12, pl. 94.5; for the Paduan, see KLAWANS 1977, no. 2)



Obv. L. SEPTIMIUS SEVERVS PERTINAX AVG IMP VII. Cuirassed bust of Septimius Severus r. Dotted border.



© Bertolami Fine Arts, E-Auction 73, 14 Sept. 2019, lot 1583 (36.52g)

12. German bracteate of Friedrich I (Frankfurt, 1152-1190 – BERGER 1993)



Obv. Facing bust of the crowned emperor holding his sceptre in his r. and a globus cruciger in his l.



© Fritz Rudolf Künker, Auction 274, 2016, lot 1887 (0.71g)

13. Renaissance fantasy of Valerio Belli (c. 1468-1546) with Ipsicrateia (ATTWOOD 2003, 377)



*Obv.* ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣ (here ΒΑΣΙΛΣ) ΥΨΙΚΡΑΤΕΙΑ. Female bust to r. in a dotted border.

*Rev.* 1. ΕΥΧΗ (at the exergue). Four figures sacrificing a ram around an altar in front of a tetrastyle temple.



© Spink, sale 17004, 22 March 2017, lot 233 (14.66g)

Rev. 2. OMONOIA EΛΛHΝΩΝ (in the left f.). Concord seated l. holding a double cornucopiae in her r. and lying her l. on the seat.



© Baldwin's Auctions Ltd, sale 67, 28 Sept. 2010, lot 2239