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The iconography of the Roman province personifications and their role in the imperial propaganda

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Abstract

Abstract of PhD thesis submitted in 2015 to the Archaeology Doctoral Programme, Doctoral School of History, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest under the supervision of Miklós Szabó.

Introduction

The province personifications are a special element of Roman art that are strongly connected to Rome's expansive policy and self-reflection. The depiction of the provinces in female form could only come to exist after the provinces themselves were established. In most cases the depictions are found within the official art, so in this respect they carry vital information on how the central administration viewed its own parts of the Empire in a given period. In some cases the use of the province personifications can also be attested in the private sphere, which is an important source for the dialogue between the state propaganda and the average citizen. It reflects how effectively, when and which representation, or rather the message it carried, reached the population.

Subject and goals

The goal of my dissertation was the iconographic analysis of the Roman province personifications and to determine their role in the imperial propaganda. The most important questions were when, how and which province was personified, and why in that exact manner? The research of these depictions already began in the beginning of the 20th century, which received greater attention at the end of the century and in the beginning of the 21st century.¹ Previously researchers tried to collect all the depictions that could be interpreted as province personifications in a catalogue, or in some cases more detailed examinations were carried out, but only of some minor and restricted group of representations. Each scholar interpreted different depictions as personifications of Roman provinces, so they also came to differing conclusions in the end. These works also served as basis for my thesis, but I took a new approach on the subject. The first aim of my research was to gather all the representations that were interpreted as province personifications. This was followed by a thorough and detailed iconographical study to be able to determine whether or not these were in fact the

¹ Some of the most noteworthy works are BIENKOWSKI 1900; JATTA 1908; TOYNBEE 1934; OSTROWSKI 1990; MÉTHY 1992; SALCEDO 1996; HOUGHTALIN 1996; DOMES 2007.

personifications of Roman provinces. Up until this day whether or not a representation could be viewed as a province personification was decided not upon an objective basis. My thesis attempts to clear the general uncertainty around this subject that can be seen amongst scholars. I therefore approach the subject from an iconographic perspective, so to be able to classify the material upon their representations, instead of the often unfounded interpretations. In my view there has to be made an important distinction between the depictions of defeated enemies, a cultural or historic region and a province established by the Romans, although this is sometimes extremely problematic. The last one can be seen as a separate group, because these were artificially created territorial units, whose purpose often was to disrupt the previous cultural or tribal, ethnic borders and to serve the Roman interests. So a unified provincial identity cannot always be expected, but if there are traces of it, is the sign of the successful romanization. Apart from this I also attempted to analyse the province personifications' grouped representations, so to better understand their ideological background and way of utilization. Last but not least, because the province personifications are closely connected to the central administration, I attempted to examine their role in the imperial propaganda from their first appearance to their last.

The analysed material and methods

My thesis only concerns itself with the province personifications, and not with personifications of e. g. Italia or Phrygia. In determining whether or not the gathered depictions represent province personifications, there are various criteria that need to be met. One of the most important is the question of sex, which is sometimes not evident. Province personifications can only be depicted in female form, because the *provincia*, just like every other word connected with the earth is feminine in ancient Greek and Latin. Opposed to e.g. the rivers and seas were always represented as males in ancient art. Another important criterion is if a male and female captive with bound hands appeared simultaneously, those can only be seen as two characteristic individuals of their nation, and not as a Roman province. It is not possible to interpret, as it is often found in the scientific literature, the man as a vanquished enemy and at the same time the woman as a personification of a province. They do however sometimes overlap, because the province is often dressed in ethnic clothes. The defeated enemies also have a great importance in the development of the province personifications, but the separation of the two images was a crucial event.

The dissertation's chronological frame spans from the appearance of the province personifications in the beginning of the 1st century BC to their disappearance in the beginning of the 4th century AD. In the Late Roman period the personification of cities were frequented instead, which alongside the administrative reforms made these images obsolete. My gathering does not limit itself to a material or object type, only the iconographic aspect was important. The coins are the most prominent in the collected material, which can be found at every province except Raetia. This is why my dissertation is mostly concerned with the analysis of the coin obverses and reverses. Their greatest significance lies in that legends identifying the personifications are right next to the depictions themselves. With this information it is also possible to start identifying representations without inscriptions. My work does not include the coins from the provincial mints, because their problematic connection with the imperial ones would make the subject incomprehensible.

The structure and results of the dissertation

The thesis begins with the preface (I) and introduction (II), the latter one also including the research history (II.1), help to the utilization of the catalogue (II.2), and the clarification of the basic concepts: province, *natio*, *gens*, *ethnos*, allegory, personification, etc. (II.3). This is followed by the antecedents of the province personifications that must be divided into Greek (III.1) and Roman (III.2) forerunners. One must note that victorious art had a major importance in both eras. In the Greek period especially the remembrance of the triumph over the Persians brought to light, or rather propagated a number of new iconographic components. The significance of the *tropaion* grew considerably and was still a symbol of victory in late antiquity. Important were also the personifications of abstract ideas (democracy, *boulé*), regions and cities that spread all across the Greek world. The third major factor was the self-glorification of the Hellenistic rulers, in which the personifications and the depiction of foreign ethnicities played a great role. The *pompé* of the Hellenistic kings is also the link to the Roman era. Rome's generals were impressed by and envied the luxury and splendour of the Hellenistic rulers' triumphal and funeral processions. The Roman army commanders took over this tradition and started also visually to compete with each other, in order to further emphasize their own virtues and achievements. A component of the *pompa* was also the depiction of great deeds and battles on wooden boards, which the scholars until recently confused with the *tabulae pictae* that were displayed in public spaces.² The triumphal processions' important part was to carry three-dimensional models of cities, rivers, mountains and regions, which portrayed the distant and exotic battle fields for the people of Rome. Another significant element was the display of the vanquishing of foreign ethnicities, barbarians that later also had an effect on some of the province personifications.

Chapter IV is concerned with the classification of the type of images used for the province personifications. Here it could be concluded that the head/bust and standing types were most frequently employed. It is also noteworthy that heads or busts only occupied coin obverses and reverses until 68–69 AD, afterwards the province personifications only appear as full-bodied representations. The latter ones could be divided into 8 types, which could further be classified into subgroups and variants. By analyzing which type of image was used for which province at what time, I was able to gain further knowledge on the ideological background, application and popularity of the province personifications. Here some tendencies could also be observed. The seated province personifications were primarily employed to represent subjection and defeat, while the reclining ones signify extraordinary fruitfulness and abundance. Several older and well-known image types were employed to represent province personifications, which for the ancient viewer bore additional information. A type of image does not necessarily bear the same meaning during several hundreds of years, but this too provides new information on the interpretation.

Chapters V–XXVII are the core of the dissertation, where I analysed the province personifications in alphabetical order. All in all I managed to collect and identify 243 personifications and 61 variants of 23 Roman provinces (Achaia, Aegyptos, Africa, Arabia, Asia, Bithynia, Britannia, Cappadocia, Cilicia, Dacia, Gallia, Germania, Hispania, Iudaea, Macedonia, Mauretania, Moesia,

2 ÖSTENBERG 2009, 189–199; cf. HOLLIDAY 2002, 80–83

Noricum, Pannonia, Raetia, Sicilia, Syria, Thracia). The distribution of the personifications between the provinces is not equal; Africa has 146, while e. g. Noricum or Raetia only one. Each chapter begins with a historical presentation of the given province's establishment and importance. This is followed by the analyses of the personifications according to the type of object, starting with the coins, since those are the most frequent artefacts. The coins are treated in a typological and chronological order. Furthermore I also tried to take into consideration that the various denominations targeted different social classes, and by the rest of the material the differentiation between private and public sphere. For every representation I tried to collect all the parallels and forerunners, because it adds valuable information to the interpretation. I conducted my research not only on an iconographic basis, but I also constantly attempted to analyze the underlying historical background. It is after all a vital question when, why and how the province personifications were employed. The picture that emerged from this analysis is far more complex than in the previous studies, so the preceding theories are in some cases reinforced, while in other cases corrected or even completely rejected. Naturally by answering old questions, new ones arise, which I was not able fully to resolve, so this must be done by the future scholars. At the end of each chapter the results are concluded in a short summary. The last part of each chapter is the catalogue so to ease the use of the thesis. I also tried to supply an image to every item, because this was a great obstacle while researching this subject.

Chapter XXVIII covers the analyses of the grouped province personifications, which are visible in greater number on coins, reliefs and mosaics. These joined representations bear vital information about the province personifications' location, function and the viewers' cultural and social status. By analyzing the depictions, where more than two province personifications were employed, it is possible to obtain new insight into their ideological background. The chapter examines the Hadrian's and Antoninus Pius' coin series, the reliefs of the Hadrianeum and the so called Parthian monument of Ephesos, together with the mosaics of Ostia, El Djem and Zeugma. By analyzing their location it can be concluded that grouped province personifications were both employed in private and public sphere. The coins thanks to their material value and denominations reached all the social groups, increasing the dissemination of the information and the message they carried. The static reliefs served foremost representational purposes in religious sphere. Their important aspect was the visual support of the dynastic propaganda, which expressed the support of the whole Roman Empire in favour of the emperor and the imperial family. The mosaics on the other hand had more manifold function mapping and expressing the greatness of the Empire in general, but they also emphasised local aspects. The grouped province personifications are one of the most interesting and complex subjects with numerous questions still unanswered, which the future scholars will hopefully clarify.

Chapter XIX covers the history of the province personifications and their role in the imperial propaganda. There are 4 major time periods, when the provinces appeared in the official art:

- 81–71 BC
- 40s BC
- year of the Four Emperors – 3rd century AD
- second half of the 3rd century AD

The province personifications were brought to life by the Roman generals' need to glorify their victories, which was also continued by the emperors, them being the supreme commanders of all troops. Previously there were iconographic ways to depict vanquished enemies, but in the meantime the need to portray whole provinces also arose. However this demand came from the central administration, so their use was always closely connected to the various political goals.

In the earliest period the moneyers often recalled the memory of their glorious forefathers, but Pompey had none, so he propagated his own achievements with the help of the province personifications. Caesar, his adversary also tried to compete in terms of propaganda, so the personifications of provinces gained evermore in importance. Afterwards, however it is completely absent from the coinage of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. The provinces had a leading role in overthrowing Nero, which also made its mark on the iconography. On hand of the Roman Republican age analogies the province personifications emerged successively. Their inherent propagandistic value was most widely recognised and utilized by Galba. With the appearance of the Flavian dynasty the province personifications were put in a completely new perspective. Vespasian's personal achievements in suppressing the revolt in Judea secured for him the necessary military support, which was also propagated on his coins. Two other important elements, the *tropaeum* and Victoria also left a mark on the personification of Judea. From now on the defeated provinces became one of the most important messengers of the victorious emperor's deeds. Domitian and Trajan also based their coin propaganda on this, which they took full advantage of. Under Hadrian and Antoninus Pius the peaceful aspect of the province personifications was emphasized, when these representations flourished. In the second half of the 2nd century AD the number of provinces personified was drastically reduced, they did not even appear in the imperial coinage in the first half of the 3rd century AD. From the middle of the 3rd century AD some emperors revived the tradition, and created new province personifications that can all be connected to military events. In this late phase only few provinces appeared and only for a short time, but with several differentiation variants.

The province personifications were used to express the close connection between emperors and their power base, they possess a fascinating and remarkably versatile iconography that stood primarily in the service of the imperial propaganda.

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