



Bulgarian Numismatic Journal Supplementary Series

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18065071



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<https://bulgnj.com>

ISSN: 2815-4827

ISBN: 978-619-92562-8-2

Coins of the Roman Bithynia Known in Western Europe in the 16th Century

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to discuss coins from Roman Bithynia described in the oldest printed works including coins of the eastern provinces. These works are: *Discorso sopra le medaglie antiche* by Sebastiano Erizzo (1525–1585) and *Imperatorum Romanorum numismata* by Adolphus Occo (1524–1606). In the former appeared (in the second edition of 1568) a total of five coins of the KOINON BEIΘYNIAC types, from Nikaia and Herakleia Pontika, while in the latter appeared a total of ten KOINON BEIΘYNIAC types, as well as others from Nikaia and Nikomedia. An attempt was also made to identify the coins described by 16th-century authors with the types present in contemporary collections and their catalogues (Rec Gen 1910, RPC), and to clarify errors in the transcription of their legends.

Keywords: Roman provincial coins, Koinon of Bithynia, Herakleia Pontika, Nikaia, Nikomedia, Sebastiano Erizzo, Adolphus Occo.



The mid-16th century marked a significant period in the study of ancient Greek and Roman coins. Guillaume Budé (1467–1540) explored metrology and ancient (including Greek) denominations in *De asse et partibus eius*, the earliest printed book on ancient coins (1514).¹ Three years later, Andrea Fulvio introduced the first “iconographic” approach in his work *Illustrium imagines* (see Berghaus 1997, iii). The first author to devote his work also to coin reverses, thereby beginning actual numismatics, was Enea Vico (c. 1523–1567). His *Le imagini con tutti i riversi trovati et le vite de gli imperatori tratte della medaglie et dalle historie de gli antichi* (first edition 1548) and *Discorsi... sopra le medaglie de gli antichi divisi in due libri* from 1555 (see Dekesel 1997, 971–979), however, are devoted exclusively or almost exclusively to imperial coins.²

The first work to discuss a range of provincial coins in addition to the dominant Roman imperial coins is *Discorso sopra le medaglie antiche* by Sebastiano Erizzo (1525–1585), first published in Venice in 1559.³ The purpose of this article is to compare the coins of Bithynia present in Erizzo’s work and *Imperatorum Romanorum numismata* by Adolph Occo (1524–1606), first published in Antwerp in 1579, and to try to answer how much knowledge of provincial coins from the major centres of northwest Asia Minor increased in Western Europe in the second half of the 16th century, and to what extent the early modern descriptions of coins allow the identification

¹ See Budé 1514. On subsequent editions and first translations of this work, see Dekesel 1997, 171–200.

² Only his *Le imagini delle donne auguste intagliate in istampa di rame* include an Alexandrian tetradrachm with a portrait of Poppea, see Vico 1557, pl. XLVI.

³ See Dekesel 1997, 359 and 360–362 (on the 1568 and subsequent editions) and Babelon 2004, 79.

of particular Bithynian types in modern catalogues.

An increased knowledge of Bithynian coins can already be seen in subsequent editions of Erizzo's *Discorso*. The first edition describes only one Bithynian coin, i.e. Commodus' bronze of Nikaia as "a medal of Marcus Commodus at a fairly young age, Greek, large, of yellow metal, with such letters: ΛΟΥΚΗ. ΚΟΜΟΔΟC. ΚΑΙCΑΡ, that is L. Commodus Caesar" (Erizzo 1559, 361: "*la medaglia di M. Commodo, Greca, grande, di metallo giallo, in assai gioueni le età, con lettere tali: ΛΟΥΚΗ. ΚΟΜΟΔΟC. ΚΑΙCΑΡ, cio è L. Commodus Caesar*") and the reverse with "two figures, one sitting on a chair, which is Jupiter, the other standing, sacrificing to Jupiter, which is the figure of Commodus, with letters such underneath: ΝΙΚΑΙΕΩΝ" ("*due figure, l'una sedente sopra una sedia, che è Giove, l'altra in piedi, che sacrifica à Giove, ch'è la figura di Commodo, con lettere tali sotto: ΝΙΚΑΙΕΩΝ*"). The description and the woodcut in Erizzo's book showing the reverse allow identification of this "medal" with the large bronze (AE30) of Nikaia (type Rec Gen 1910, 236, pl. LXXIII, 8; RPC IV. 1 [temporary] 5982), with the difference, however, that the actual obverse legend of the coin is Λ ΑΥΡΗ ΚΟΜΟΔΟC ΚΑΙCΑΡ (**Fig. 1**). The only other coin related to Bithynia, although minted in Rome, that appears in the first edition of *Discorso*, is "a large coin of beautiful metal" (Erizzo 1559, 244: "*la medaglia grande di bel metallo*") of Hadrian with the reverse legend RESTITVTORI BITHYNIAE, which can be identified with a sesterce of the type RIC III.3, 1840–42.



Fig. 1. Bithynia, Nikaia. Commodus (as Caesar), AD 175–177. Obv. Λ ΑΥΡΗ ΚΟΜΟΔΟC ΚΑΙCΑΡ, bare head of Commodus (youthful) with traces of aegis to right; on aegis, Medusa head. Rev. to left, emperor standing, right, wearing toga, holding patera over thin round altar; to right, statue of Zeus seated, left, holding patera and long sceptre, resting feet on base, ΝΙΚΑΙΕΩΝ in ex. Rec Gen 1910, 236, pl. LXXIII.8; RPC IV.1 (temporary) 5982. Diameter 29 mm, weight 15.08 g. (Photo: BnF: <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coin/188958>).



Fig. 2. Koinon of Bithynia. Hadrian, AD 121–138. Obv. ΑΥΤ ΚΑΙC ΤΡΑΙ ΑΔΙΑΝΟC CEBA, laureate head of Hadrian to right. Rev. ΚΟΙ-ΝΟΝ / ΒΕΙΘΥΝΙΑC, octastyle temple on podium of two steps; in pediment, pellet. Rec Gen 1910, 41; RPC III, 992. Diameter 35 mm, weight 25.97 g. (Photo: Künker, auction 288 [13 Mar. 2017], 561).

In the second edition of Erizzo's work, however, three new types⁴ appear: "a large and a small Hadrian's coin of beautiful metal" (Erizzo 1568, 393: "*la medaglia di Adriano grande, & piccola, & di bellissimo metallo*") with the "beautiful temple" ("*bellissimo tempio*") on the reverse and legend ΚΟΙΝΟΝ ΒΕΙΘΥΝΙΑC,⁵ as well as "a still large" coin (Erizzo 1568, 394: "*ancora grande*") of Sabina with the obverse legend CЄBACTH CΑΒЄΙΝΑ and the reverse with "a beautiful temple with three deities within it" ("*un bellissimo tempio con tre deità dentro di quello*"), and the Greek legend ΚΟΙ-ΝΟΝ ΒΕΙΘΥΝΙΑC. The first two, which Erizzo connects to the sesterces he describes with the legend RESTITVTORI BITHYNIAE (Erizzo 1563, 394), can be identified with large bronze coins RPC III, 992; Rec Gen 1910, 41 (**Fig. 2**) and the small ones RPC III, 999; Rec Gen 1910, 48 or 48 var. (**Fig. 3**), or similar,⁶ while the coin minted for Hadrian's wife can be unambiguously identified with type RPC III, 988 or 1022 (**Fig. 4**). According to the modern reference catalogue, these three deities

⁴ For Commodus' coin described already in the 1559 edition see Erizzo 1568, 530.

⁵ In Erizzo's work: ΒΕΙΘΥΝΙΑC.

⁶ But also RPC III, 989–995, 1002–1004, 1009–1015 and 1017–1019 for large bronzes, and 999–1000, 1007, 1007a and 1021 for small bronze denominations (Æ 20–22) are possible.

comprise the Capitoline triad: in the centre, Zeus (Jupiter) stands facing, resting with right hand on long sceptre, between Hera (Juno), left standing right and Athena (Minerva), right ("Standing left Hera rests with left hand on long sceptre. Athena crowns Zeus and holds an aphlaston in her left hand; below, prow."). In the same edition of *Discorso*, a small coin of orichalcum ("*piccola, di metal giallo*") minted in Herakleia Pontika for Geta is described. Its obverse bears the legend Π. ΣΕΠΤΙ. ΓΕΤΑΚ and reverse the legend ΗΡΑΚΛΗΑΚ ΕΝ ΠΟΝΤΩ and "a beautiful naked figure, holding a patera with his right hand and in his left hand he has" the author "does not know what" (Erizzo 1568, 636: "*una bella figura ignuda, che con la destra tiene una patera & nella sinistra ha non so che*"). The type of this rare coin is also known from contemporary collections (Rec Gen 1908, 153; SNG von Aulock 394), as is a figure on the reverse, perhaps (according to Rec Gen 1908) Agathodaimon, holding patera and two ears (**Fig. 5**).



Fig. 3. Koinon of Bithynia. Hadrian, AD 121–138. Obv. AVT KAIC TRAI AΔPIANOC CEB, laureate head of Hadrian to right. Rev. KOI-NON / BEIΘYNIAC, octastyle temple on podium of two steps, with three pellets in pediment. Rec Gen 48 var.; RPC III, 999. Diameter 22 mm, weight 6.17 g. and 6.73 g (Photo: Nomos AG, auction Obolos 26 [18 Dec. 2022], 342 and 6 [20 Nov. 2016], 637).



Fig. 4. Koinon of Bithynia. Sabina, AD 128–136/7. Obv. CABEINA CEBACTH, draped bust of Sabina to right, with hair coiled and piled on top of head above double stephane. Rev. KOI-NON / BEIΘYNIAC, distyle temple set on base with two steps; within, the Capitoline Triad: Zeus standing right, holding long sceptre in his right hand, between Hera, on the left, standing right and holding long sceptre in her right hand, and Athena, on the right, standing left, holding aphlaston in her left hand and crowning Zeus with a wreath held in her right; in pediment, sacrificing Genius or Hadrian (?) standing facing between two pellets, holding sceptre in his left hand and sacrificing with his right above lit altar; in exergue, prow. Rec Gen 1910, 59; RPC III, 1022. Diameter 35 mm, weight 23.83 g (Photo: Roma Numismatics XXII [8 Oct. 2021], 535).

Fig. 5. Herakleia Pontika. Geta (as Caesar), AD 198–209. Obv. Π ΣΕΠΤΙ ΓΕΤΑΚ, draped and cuirassed bust of Geta to right. Rev. ΗΡΑΚΛΗΑΚ ΕΝ ΠΟΝΤΩ, a figure on the reverse, perhaps Agathodaimon, holding patera and two ears. Rec Gen 1908, 153; SNG von Aulock 394. Diameter c. 20 mm, weight 4.56 g (Photo: Gorny&Mosch Giessener Münzhandlung, auction 155 [3 Mar. 2007], 213).

Erizzo's work was one of the sources of *Imperatorum Romanorum numismata* by Adolph Occo, doctor of medicine from Augsburg, published in 1579 (expanded editions appeared in 1601, 1625, and 1683).⁷ However, there are only two references to the Venetian author in the description of coins from Bithynia (Occo 1579, 165 and 328). Occo introduces the classification of coins according to obverse legends and the corresponding reverses. In the case of coins with Greek legends, he recorded reverses from different mints under a given variant of the imperial titulature.

Among the reverses subordinated to the legend AYT. KAIC. TRAI. AΔPIANOC CEB., the type with the temple and the KOINON legend, already described by Erizzo, is the first to appear (Occo 1579, 163). Since the same obverse legend appears on all types of bronzes, it cannot be resolved whether Occo included the higher denominations of 32–35 mm (RPC III 991, 993, 995, 1002–1004, 1017 and 1018) in diameter or the smaller ones (RPC III 996, 1000, 1005–1013A, 1016). The legend of the coin struck for Sabina by the koinon of Bithynia is cited after *Discorso* (Occo 1579, 165 refers to "Erizzo, 394"), although the description "quadrangular tower with ornaments" ("*turris quadrangula cum suis ornamentis*") refers to a different coin. Another coin from the province of Bithynia is that of Nikomedia minted for Antoninus Pius with the obverse legend AYT. KAICAP ANTQNINOC and reverse legend ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΕΩΣ ΝΙΚΟΜΗΔΕΙΑΣ, and "a half-naked figure standing and holding round shields (*clipei*) in both hands" (Occo 1579, 182: "*Figura seminuda stans, utraque manu veluti clypeos tenens*"). The description of this coin does not allow its clear identification. Occo may be trying to characterise here a small bronze denomination Rec Gen 1910, 66, which has the same legends, and its reverse shows Hermes standing on a base, facing, wearing a mantle and crossing arms in front of his chest (**Fig. 6**). The crossed arms of the god may have looked like oval shields to the Augsburg author. Another coin from Bithynia, which Occo included in his work, is again a bronze from Nicomedia – minted in the time of Marcus Aurelius with the obverse legend AY KAI. M. AYPHAI. ANTΩNINOC and reverse NEIKOMH. ΜΗΤΡΟΝΕΩΚΟ and with "a figure standing in the temple, with her right hand lifting ears, it seems, in her left holding a spear" (Occo 1579, 200: "*Figura stans in templo, dextra spicas, ut videtur, deorsum porrigens, sinistra hastam*"). The closest to the coin described in 1579 seems to be the Rec Gen 1910, 82 or 83 type, with the difference, however, that the first type in the early 20th-century catalogue notes a shorter obverse legend AYT K M AY ANTQNINOC and longer reverse legend: ΜΗΤΡ ΝΕΩΚ ΝΕΙΚΟΜΗΔ, while the other has only a slightly different obverse legend AYT KAI M AYPH ANTQNINOC and a different, more complete reverse legend ΜΗΤΡΟΠ ΚΑΙ ΠΡΩΤ ΝΕΩΚΟΠΟΥ and ΝΙΚΟΜΗΔΕΙ in exergue. On the other hand, the coin of Commodus with the obverse legend AYT. KAI. AYP. KOMMOΔOC ANTQNINOC and reverse legend ΝΙΚΟΜΙΔΕΩΝ ΔΙ ΝΕΩΚΟΡΩΝ can be accurately identified thanks to the very distinctive iconography of its reverse: "a praetorian ship with three banks of oars, full, and two most beautiful temples" (Occo 1579, 224: "*Triremis praetoria referta naui; et duo templa pulcherrima*"). The coin so described best matches the Rec Gen 1910, 165 type, which, however, has a slightly different obverse legend: AYT K M AYP KOMMOΔOC ANTQNINOC (**Fig. 7**). The coin described as such best matches the Rec 165 type, which, however, has a slightly different obverse legend, and one must admit that some of the known specimens have the initial part of the obverse legend effaced or deficient.⁸ Occo first described three coins from Septimius Severus' Nikomedia: one with the obverse legend AYT. K. A. CΕΠΤ. CΕΟΥΗΡOC AYΓ. and the reverse legend ΝΙΚΟΜΙΔΩΝ and 'Jupiter sitting with a spear in his left hand' (Occo 1579, 251: "*Iuppiter sedens, sinistra hastam*") and the two others with the obverse legend AY. K. A. CΕΠΤΙ. CΕΟΥΗΡOC Π. or AY. K. A. CΕΠΤΙ. CΕΟΥΗΡOC ΠΕΡ (Occo 1579, 250) and the emperor's head in a *corona radiata*; their reverse features "a temple with eight columns" (Occo 1579, 251: "*Templum octo columnarum*") and a longer legend: ΝΙΚΟΜΗΔΕΩΝ ΔΙC ΝΕΩΚΟΡΩΝ (Occo 1579, 250) or ΝΙΚΟΜΙΔΕΩΝ ΔΙC ΝΕΩΚΟΡΩΝ (Occo, 1579, 251). The first type of Severus coins has no direct parallel among coins known today. However, the description

⁷ See Dekesel 1997, 672; Dekesel 2003, 1963–1964 (only 1601 and 1625 editions); for Occo and the significance of his work: Babelon 2004, 78–79 and Kluczek 2019, 25–37. References to Erizzo appear in the first edition of Occo's work 19 times – see Occo 1579, 4, 83, 143, 165, 200, 212, 221, 235, 243, 292, 299, 304, 306, 320, 323, 328, 345–346, but in Occo (1625) *Discorso* is quoted 50 times.

⁸ Including the specimen illustrated in Rec Gen 1910 (pl. XCII. 37).

of the second two coins corresponds to types Rec Gen 1910, 178 (Fig. 8) or 185,⁹ except that in the case of both Septimius Severus' and the earlier Commodus' coins, the issuer's name is written as ΝΙΚΟΜΗΔΕΩΝ, not ΝΙΚΟΜΙΔΕΩΝ, which is probably an error made under the influence of Byzantine Greek pronunciation prevalent in the 16th century (see Tomè 2017, 86). Very interesting is the description of another coin – a bronze of Caracalla also from Nicomedia. Its legends are ΑΝΤΩΝΕΙΝΟΣ ΑΥΓΟΥΣΤΟΣ on the obverse and ΝΙΚΟ(ΜΗ)ΔΕΩΝ ΔΙ-Σ ΝΕΩΚΟΡΩΝ on the reverse. In addition, there is supposed to be "a figure folding her lips for a kiss with a great serpent in front of her" (Occo 1579, 265: "*Figura insistens basi cum magno coram ipsa serpent*") on the reverse. This description seems to match the Rec Gen 1910, 225 type showing 'the serpent Glykon in coils with a large human head without a beard' (Fig. 9).



Fig. 6. Nikomedia. Antoninus Pius, AD 138–161. Obv. ΑΥΤ ΚΑΙCΑΡ ΑΝΤΩΝΕΙΝΟΣ, Laureate head of Antoninus Pius to right. Rev. ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΕ ΝΙΚΟΜΗΔΙ, Herm of veiled Hermes standing on base, facing, wearing mantle and crossing arms in front of chest. Rec Gen 1910, 66; RPC IV.1, (temporary) 10436. Diameter 17 mm, weight 3.71 g (Photo: Classical Numismatic Group, electronic auction 363 [11 Nov. 2015], 286).



Fig. 7. KNikomedia. Commodus (as Augustus), AD 180–182. Obv. ΑΥΤ Κ Μ ΑΥΡ ΚΟΜΜΟΔΟΣ ΑΝΤΩΝΙΝΟΣ, laureate-headed bust of Commodus (lightly bearded) wearing cuirass and paludamentum to right. Rev. ΝΙΚΟΜΗΔΕΩΝ / ΔΙC ΝΕΩΚΟΡΩΝ, galley with six rowers, left; on stern, two standards; in background, two temples with eight columns each. Rec Gen, 1910, 165; RPC IV.1, (temporary) 5641. Diameter 34.6 mm, weight 23.11 g (Photo: Numismatica Ars Classica, auction 51 [7 Oct. 2009], 486).



Fig. 8. Nikomedia. Septimius Severus, AD 193–211. Obv. ΑΥ Κ Λ CΕΠΤΙ CΕΟΥΗΡΟΣ Π, radiate head of Septimius Severus to right. Rev. ΝΙΚΟΜΗΔΕΩΝ / ΔΙC ΝΕΩΚΟΡΩΝ, Octastyle temple, with pellet in pediment. Rec Gen, 1912, 178. Diameter 33 mm, weight 24.94 g (Photo: Classical Numismatic Group, electronic auction 381 [24 Aug. 2016], 301).



Fig. 9. Nikomedia. Caracalla (as Augustus), AD 198–217. Obv. ΑΝΤΩΝΕΙΝΟΣ ΑΥΓΟΥCΤΟΣ, laureate head of Caracalla to right. Rev. ΝΙΚΟ(ΜΗ)ΔΕΩΝ ΔΙ-C ΝΕΩΚΟΡΩΝ, the serpent Glykon coiled right, with human head. Rec Gen, 1912, 226 var. (bust type). Diameter 26 mm, weight 11.49 g (Photo: Classical Numismatic Group, electronic auction 344 [12 Feb. 2015], 311).

⁹ Although a variant of the legend with the abbreviation CΕΠΤΙ ΠΕΡ is not attested in contemporary literature on the subject and available online databases.

The transcription of the obverse legend of popular coin types of Severus Alexander from the Nikaia mint is problematic. Adolph Occo cites a reverse with “three military signs” (*“Tria signa militaria”*) and the legend NIKAEEN (sic!) and NIKAEON under the obverse legend AYT K. M. AYP. CEB. AΛEΞANΔPOC (Occo 1579, 288) and only AΛEΞANΔPOC (Occo 1579, 290). He confuses the abbreviation AYT(οκράτωρ) with AYΓ(ουστός) here, while the legend with only the name AΛEΞANΔPOC is not attested. The actual legend for the type Rec Gen 1910, 617 (**Fig. 10**) and its several variants (RPC VI temporary No. 3201–3203 and 30139) is M AYP CEYH AΛEZANΔPOC AYΓ CEY(H) or M AVP AΛEZANΔPOC A(Y)(Γ) (or AYΓ or AYΓ). The NIKAE reverse legend is also uncertified. Many surviving specimens do not have a complete legend, which excuses the author’s mistake. However, he could have noticed that during the Severan dynasty, instead of the Greek translation of the title Augustus (σεβαστός) a transliteration was spread in Bithynia.



Fig. 10. Nikaia. Severus Alexander, AD 222–235. AE 21 (20.5 mm, 5.07 g, 1 h). M AYP CEY AΛEZANΔPOC AY, laureate head of Severus Alexander to right. Rev. NI K AI E/ ON, three military standards topped with wreaths. Rec Gen 1912, 617; RPC VI, (temporary) 3195. Diameter c. 20 mm, weight 5.63 g. (Photo Dr. Busso Peus Nachf., e-auction 10 [18 Jan. 2020], 632).

A comparison of two major works from the second half of the 16th century, which included descriptions of coins from Roman Bithynia, shows a clear increase in the number of known KOINON BEIΘYNIAC coin types and types minted mainly in Nikaia and Nikomedia. In the first edition of *Discorso* by Erizzo, only one rare bronze of Commodus struck in Nikaia is described (Rec Gen 1910, 236); in the second edition of his work (1568) there are already five different coins from Bithynia: three of the types of Koinon of Bithynia (RPC III 992 and 999 or similar, and 988 or 1022), the aforementioned Nikaia bronze of Commodus, and the rare bronze of Geta minted in Herakleia Pontika (SNG von Aulock 394). Occo describes as many as ten types of coins from Bithynia (KOINON BEIΘYNIAC, Nikaia, Nikomedia) a mere 20 years after *Discorso* was first published.

While the number of a dozen coins of Bithynia described in works from the second half of the 16th century may not seem like much, it should be remembered that the entire area of the former Roman province in northern Asia Minor was by then already under the rule of the Ottoman Empire for more than 100 years, which was hostile to the countries of Christian Europe. In the case of Erizzo, who based his work on research in Italian collections, it can be assumed that some of the coins known to the author of *Discorso* arrived there as late as the 14th and 15th centuries, along with Byzantine immigrants. The popularity of coin collecting in Augsburg is evidenced by a list of as many as 28 collectors and/or scholars of ancient coins associated with the city, as reported by Hubertus Goltzius (1526–1583) in his famous work *C. Iulius Caesar sive historiae imperatorum caesarumque Romanorum ex antiquis numismatibus restitutae liber primus* (Goltzius 1563, bb), in which he lists 978 numismatists he encountered in the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and France. Augsburg appears to be the city with the most numerous numismatic centres. Even if we deduct the Emperor Ferdinand I (1503–1564) and his son, Archduke Ferdinand II (1529–1595), mentioned by Goltzius as being temporarily in the city, 27 numismatists of Augsburg remain. This is a larger number even than that of Venice (25 names), and is surpassed only (slightly) by Paris (28 names), Naples (47), and Rome (71). The Augsburg numismatists included as many as seven physicians (including Occo), but also, for instance, Vladislaus Vliscon, “Pannonius”, i.e. the Hungarian who may have come into direct contact with the Turks. Nevertheless, it seems that ancient coins of Bithynia and other Roman provinces were also flowing into the receptive western European market during the peak of the Ottoman Empire’s expansion in the 16th century. The growth in the number of collections, as well as numismatic works in the second half of the 16th century, however, meant that authors such as Occo knew some of the coins only by description, which implied the presence of the errors noted above in the transcription of Greek legends.

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