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# The Siege of the Fortification in Oradea (1692) reflected on Baroque Medals\*

*„Whether you wish it or not, His Majesty will protect you...”*  
(A. Dunod)<sup>1</sup>

**Călin Ghemiș, Constantin Iosif Zgardan**

**Abstract:** In the context of the revival of the Habsburg Empire encouraged by the victory against the Turks at Vienna, in the time span between October 1691 and June 1692, Oradea was conquered by the imperial troops led by General Donath Heissler. In order to celebrate this victory Leopold I issued three medals of different types, made of bronze, silver, tin and gold. The medals are described and discussed as numismatic documents regarding the history of Oradea, being in this way the first Baroque objects that celebrate the new town of the Habsburg Empire; on the other hand these medals marks the re-birth of this important city of Partium.

**Keywords:** Baroque, medals, Oradea, siege, 1692, numismatics.

## **Argument**

No doubt, the defeat of the Turks during the siege of Vienna marked the second half of the seventeenth century, the revival of the Habsburg Empire and implicitly that of the Holy League, leading to an unprecedented counter-offensive of the anti-Ottoman league in Europe.

In this political situation, the position of Transylvania was extremely important. Thus Jesuit Antide Dunod's 1685 mission in Transylvania was a remarkable moment in the development of diplomatic relations between the Imperial Court and Transylvania. The treaty suggested by prince Mihai Apafi included the incorporation of Transylvania into the Empire and its active involvement in the military actions of the Holy League; the prince's refuse determined Dunod to reconsider his position and to attract Mihail Teleki, at that time chancellor of Transylvania, on the imperial side<sup>2</sup>. If diplomatic actions did not lead to expected results, military actions performed during the autumn and winter of 1685 under the leadership of General Caraffa, especially in Partium, constrained the prince to sign the treaty from Dumbrăveni. Though this treaty, the prince agreed to pay certain sums and to provision the troops in Partium. The treaty of Vienna was concluded in June 1686, ending the first phase of Transylvania's incorporation into the Empire, i.e. the Haller Treatise. Its direct consequence was the establishment of imperial garrisons in Cluj and Deva, but it also marked the ignition of a policy meant to consolidate the new rule.

In this context, after a 32-year long occupation, Oradea witnessed the siege marking the end of the Turkish domination there and implicitly of the homonym pashalik.

Started in the autumn of 1691, the siege was lifted in June 5<sup>th</sup> 1692; the city's strategic significance for both the Turkish and imperial forces justifies the actions taken for its preservation and conquest, respectively<sup>3</sup>.

The victory of the imperials led by General Donath Heissler was highly regarded by the imperial Court and recorded as such in that period's historical sources.

Among these sources, those pertaining to numismatics (including the study of medals) benefited from little if no attention at all from historians approaching the history of the city on Crișul Repede River<sup>4</sup>, despite the fact that they are true examples of Baroque art with direct reference to the history and iconography of the fortification.

\* English translation: Ana M. Gruia.

<sup>1</sup> Andea, Andea 2003, 359.

<sup>2</sup> Andea, Andea 2003, 356.

<sup>3</sup> For a very good presentation of the military action stages around Oradea during the siege, see Georgiță 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Borcea, Gorun 1995; Borcea, Gorun 2007.

On the one hand, as I will subsequently indicate, the items were part of a type meant to justify through their selected elements of iconography the policy of the Habsburgs in this part of Europe.

Meant to establish an event in that era's collective mentality, the items taken into consideration here were minted in the year of the siege or the subsequent one; the importance of the military developments and of the newly conquered territory determined the minting of one of the items in gold, thus stressing even more the importance of the historical moment.

### Catalogue

Silver medal<sup>5</sup>. The obverse depicts the idealized city, preserving some elements that can also be found on contemporary prints such as the citadel or the borough. The city is depicted in the foreground, surrounded by walls, with a mosque visible in the right hand monetary field. The Olosig palanka can be seen in the left side of the image, connected to the city by a bridge and just partially depicted. The left side of the composition is dominated by the fortification, with three bastions visible, doubled by a wall on the inside. The princely palace is represented in the center of the fortification; its construction was initiated by Gabriel Bethlen, but it was his successor, George Rakoczi I, who saw it completed. The towers of the former cathedral, turned into a mosque after 1660, can be seen inside the palace walls, besides two other edifices with towers. The hills of Oradea dominate the entire composition, surmounted by a banner-like ribbon, ending with tassels, marked with the name of the new imperial city: GROSS.WARDEIN.

The legend, placed in the lower part of the monetary field, reads: AUSPICIIS LEOPOLDI M(*agni*) DEDIT CAPT(*a*) D(*ie*) 5 IUN(*ii*) A(*nno*) 1692.



The reverse of the medal depicts an allegorical scene. In the middle ground one can see a draped female figure, the personification of Dacia, leaning and looking down and left. In her left hand she holds a few laurel leaves and in her right, a cornucopia.

Two genii, depicted as putti, flank the character in the lower part of the composition. Judging after their attributes (the one on the right, shown standing, in a dynamic posture, holds a sickle in his right hand and a sheaf of grain; the one on the left is seated and supports a basket of fruit above his head), they can easily be interpreted as genii of agriculture. The entire artistic composition suggests the bountifulness of the province recovered for the Holy Western Roman Empire. The legend, placed in the upper part of the monetary field, is extremely suggestive: DACIA FELIX. There is another relief inscription along the edge: AUSTRIACIS MAGNAS FERT TRANSSILVANIA GRATES.

The name of the engraver who made this medal is also known: Georg Hautsch. Dimensions: diameter: 37 mm; weight: 16.86 gr. Silver.

2. Wooden medal boasting<sup>6</sup>. The obverse contains the overlapping busts of Leopold I and his son Joseph facing right. The following inscription is placed around the rim of the monetary field:

LEOPOLDUS/M(*agnus*).RO(*manorum*).IMP(*erator*)IOSEPHUS/R(*ex*).ET/H(*eredis*)/R(*omanorum*)/AVGVSTI/TURCARUM VICTORES PERPETVI\*.

<sup>5</sup> The item is preserved in Constantin Iosif Zgardan's collection in Oradea; an identical item at: <http://mcsearch.info/record.html?id=196461>.

<sup>6</sup> The item was identified at: <http://mcsearch.info/record.html?id=35887>.





As in the case of the first medal, the reverse depicts an allegory. In the left foreground, Leopold I, wearing a laurel wreath and sitting on a throne, receives the keys of the city from a kneeling male character. Above, a winged Victory places a laurel wreath on the emperor's head. The idealized image of the city can be distinguished in the background of the allegorical composition.

The following inscription occupies the lower part of the monetary field: VARADINUM RECEPTUM. DIE.V.IUNI MDCXCII

Another inscription is placed on the rim, above the entire composition: ASSVETA TUIS SEMPER VICTORIA CASTRIS.

Engraver: Philipp Heinrich Muller. Dimensions: diameter: 57 mm. Unknown weight. Wood.

3. Obverse of boasting no. 2<sup>7</sup>. Also made of wood. It contains the overlapping busts of Leopold and his son facing right. The same inscription as in the case of the second item is placed on the exergue. Dimensions: diameter: 57 mm.



4. Reverse of the same boasting<sup>8</sup> Described at no. 2, the same allegorical scene with Leopold sitting on the throne receiving the city keys from a character that could be identified with the Roman-Catholic bishop of the time, Augustin Benkovich.



<sup>7</sup> Auction house: Dr. Busso Peus Nachfolger, auction no. 391, lot 2573, May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Auction house: iNumis, auction no. 15, lot 2906, March 25<sup>th</sup> 2011.



5. Silver medal<sup>9</sup>. The obverse reproduces an allegorical scene in which Leopold, sitting on a throne and facing left receives a letter and a shield decorated with the image of the city. The upper half contains the following inscription in the exergue: QVAE FVERANT TVA SVUNT, ET ERVNT TVVA; MAXIME CAESAR.



The item's reverse contains another allegory. In the foreground, a female character leaning on a rectangular column or a statue base, holds a staff in her right hand and with her left she holds a laurel wreath above the city depicted in the background of the artistic composition. As in the case of the obverse, the legend is placed in the upper half of the monetary field, reading: COLLIGIT IN CAMPO TALES CONSTANTIA FLORES. The item was created by engravers E. Farber and M. Brunner. Dimensions: diameter: 48 mm; weight: 44.2 gr.



6. Gold medal<sup>10</sup>, nominal value 22 ducats. The item is the final product of the wooden boastings described above – nos. 2–4. A unique piece among medals dedicated to the victory of Oradea, this item is of remarkable craftsmanship. Both obverse and reverse are identical to those of item no. 2, except for the inscription on the rim which reads: QVANTVM TVRCA, VALET GALLVS, LEPIDOSQVE GEMELLOS SOL VIDET IN GEMINIS STRAGE PERIRE PARI. Dimensions: diameter 57 mm, weight 76.50 gr.

## Discussions

These items are first remarkable through their artistic qualities, i.e. examples of classical Baroque. From a historiographic perspective, the first author to describe the first two items was canon Stephan Schoenvisner<sup>11</sup> in 1801. In his remarkable identification catalogue printed in Buda and reprinted six years later<sup>12</sup>, the author included a drawing of item no. 1 that he qualified as elegant (Fig. 1).

<sup>9</sup> Auction house: Gorny & Mosch, auction no. 172, lot 6277, October 15<sup>th</sup> 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Auction house: UBS Gold & Numismatics, auction no. 71, lot 99, September 5<sup>th</sup> 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Schoenvisner 1801, 407, pl. XI, nr. 293.

<sup>12</sup> Schoenvisner 1807, 221.



Fig. 1

At that time, the scholarly canon was not aware of the gold variant of the second item, neither was he of the item described at no. 5. I cannot explain the fact that neither item described here seems to have been included in Adolf Resch's identification catalogue printed in Sibiu in exceptional quality 100 years later<sup>13</sup>. It is hard to believe that Resch, a native of Sibiu, despite his fine knowledge of Transylvanian numismatics, never saw these items, but this might be true since these objects are so rare. Besides, Resch's introduction indicates that he was unfamiliar with Schoenvisner's 1801 edition, only mentioning that of 1807<sup>14</sup>, but even the latter included the description of the medals.

I do not intend to question or minimize the work of Adolf Resch, which holds real, yet unsurpassed value in the field of Transylvanian numismatics, but only to draw attention to a constant omission. The same medal was reproduced in H. Marczali's volume dedicated to the absolutist period in Europe, from *Vilagtortene*<sup>15</sup>, volume IX. Among historians from Oradea this time, only Constantin Mălinaș knew the item and published it; still, he did not insist on its significance but took over *mot-a-mot* Schoenvisner's descriptions of 1807<sup>16</sup>. Besides, the late historian from Oradea only mentioned the second item without reproducing it in print and thus without discussing it. Existing historiographic mentions indicate that this item is the best known. The second item under discussion was mentioned by Schoenvisner<sup>17</sup> and J. Veszerle in an identification catalogue published in Budapest in 1911 (Fig. 2)<sup>18</sup>, where item no. 2, made of silver, is depicted.



Fig. 2

Admitting that the medal or at least one of its attributes is proving or showing the power of the state or of a monarch, beyond its economical function<sup>19</sup>, then no doubt these products of leopoldine numismatics perfectly fit this interpretation. Further more, a medal's role is to establish a certain

<sup>13</sup> Resch 1901, 216 sqq.

<sup>14</sup> Resch 1901, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Marczali, s.a., 325, the Hungarian scholar reproduces an item in the collection of the National Museum in Budapest.

<sup>16</sup> Mălinaș 2007, 68.

<sup>17</sup> Schoenvisner 1801, 407.

<sup>18</sup> Veszerle 1911, Tab. XIV, nr. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Sășianu 1976, 250.

historical moment, situation, or event for posterity, securing it a place in collective memory; in the context under discussion, the expulsion of the Turks and the dissolution of the pashalik of Oradea were ideal moments for such immortalization.

As previously mentioned, the items under discussion belong to the category of propaganda documents; they are items with special, clear purpose. If personal medals<sup>20</sup> existed during the previous century or even contemporarily to our items, the three medals coined on the occasion of the siege of Oradea are part of the propaganda and justification arsenal of the Court in Vienna in its way to establishing its dominion over Partium and Transylvania.

Beyond the Habsburg monarchs' pretensions to being recognized as Roman emperors, there are several cases of titles among the propaganda instruments that insinuate and make reference to a Roman imperial tradition. I am referring to the legend: *Dacia Felix*, which Maria Theresa used later on a medal coined in 1769 in honor of Agriculture, Mining and Commerce<sup>21</sup>.

As it is known, the first coins with this legend were minted by Traianus Decius (249–251 A.D.)<sup>22</sup> and the taking over of the province denomination in Baroque medals is not by chance, as my colleague M. Munteanu has already noted<sup>23</sup>.

In all described allegories, the emperor wears the clothes of a Roman emperor, while other employed iconographical elements (the personification of the Province of Dacia, the genii, the use of Latin letters and numerals) are also elements of Latin origin.

One aspect that must be discussed here is the rendering of the city's image. In all cases it is idealized, less connected to reality, since at the time the items were produced the city had been totally destroyed during military operations; in order to encourage the re-population of Olosig and implicitly of the city, Leopold issued a privilege on December 4<sup>th</sup> 1691 during the blockade<sup>24</sup>.

The only elements supporting the certain identification of the image depicted on these medals are: the bastion-type fortification, the mosque inside the fortification, in fact the former cathedral<sup>25</sup>. the Olosig palank and The Lower City, as the settlement around the fortification was called and the ground plan of which can only be guessed today on the basis of historical prints and ground plans<sup>26</sup>.

Item analysis indicates that the first medal was more frequent, while the other two are less or completely unknown; the last medal is in the same time a numismatically unique item.

The artistic qualities are clearly superior from the point of view of the composition of the monetary field. The arrangement of iconographic elements and their manner of execution are also clearly superior to Renaissance item coined in the Empire or in Transylvania. In this sense, they perfectly fit the characteristics of leopoldine medals.

As for the number of minted items, a very limited amount of data is known; available pieces of information indicate that items with the legend "Dacia Felix" are the most frequent or common and that those made of gold are extremely rare (a single item of the type is known so far); as for the number of certain personal medals on the other hand, Samuel Koleseri's statement is interesting since it mentions that: "one hundred fifty gold medals of the prince of Walachia were recently produced as a family souvenir"<sup>27</sup>, the author referring to medals minted by Constantin Brâncoveanu. The official character of these items makes me believe that many of them were made of bronze or silver and much fewer of gold, for certain personalities.

<sup>20</sup> Among the best known: Castaldo 1554 (Resch 1901, 217); G. Basta, who coins both gold and silver medals (Resch 1901, 222.)

<sup>21</sup> Resch 1901, 240.

<sup>22</sup> Among the latest interpretation I would like to mention that supported by my colleague and friend Mihai Munteanu (Munteanu 2010, 137, including the older bibliography).

<sup>23</sup> Munteanu 2010, 251.

<sup>24</sup> Georgiță 2001, 86.

<sup>25</sup> The discovery of a pointed arch typical to Islamic architecture built-in above the altar of the Catholic church inside the fortification seems to be the only elements discovered so far that supports the existence of a mosque there (Pușcaș 2010, 76.); besides, the existence of Islamic religious buildings inside the fortification is mentioned by historical sources – among the best known I would like to mention part of the Turkish traveler Evlyâ Celebi's description of the fortification (1660): "Praised be Allah, no idol remains inside the churches of Oradea, since all became Muslim places of worship" (Celebi 1976, 528).

<sup>26</sup> Bubics 1880 pl. 351; Kisari 2007 passim, the author reproduces most of the ground plans preserved in the military archives in Karlsruhe.

<sup>27</sup> Köleséri 1983.



These medals, results of a historical event, mark Oradea's entering a new historical stage, through the inclusion of the city on the shores of Crișul Repede in the imperial structures; the results of this state of facts were long-lasting and the city's development is strictly connected to that of the Empire. Otherwise, the number of these medals, the fact that they were made out of bronze, antimony, silver and gold underline the city's status in the context of imperial administrative structures but in the same time mark the beginning of Oradea's rebirth in a new, European context.

In conclusion, the present study aims at becoming a starting point for future research that will include an analysis of known prints and ground plans of the city, of coins minted inside the city during various historical eras and of books printed in Oradea.

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1



2

Plate 1. 1. Zgardan Collection, inscription on the medal's edge; 2. Medal no. 1 enlarged image.



Plate 2. E. Farber, M. Brunner, *Silver medal (enlarged image).*





Plate 3. P. H. Muller, Gold medal (enlarged image).