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NUMISMATICS

AGONISTIC DEPICTIONS AND SPORTS CULTURE ON COINS FROM THE CITIES OF PISIDIA DURING THE ROMAN IMPERIAL PERIOD

Abstract: This study examines agonistic representations on coins minted in the cities of Pisidia during the Roman Imperial period and evaluates their significance within the broader framework of sports history. The findings demonstrate that these numismatic materials function not merely as economic instruments but as dense communicative artifacts encoding the institutional, ideological, and socio-political dimensions of ancient athletic culture. From a sports historical perspective, coins provide rare and direct material evidence for understanding how athletic practices were organized, legitimized, and symbolically reproduced across both local and imperial contexts.

Consistent with existing scholarship, agonistic practices in antiquity extended far beyond physical competition, operating as structuring principles of social life. The Pisidian evidence reinforces this interpretation by illustrating the continuity and transformation of agonistic ideology within the Roman imperial framework. In this context, athletic festivals and their representations on coinage emerge as mechanisms through which cities articulated identity, negotiated status, and positioned themselves within imperial hierarchies.

A key contribution of the study lies in identifying visual narratives of justice and institutional regulation. Coin depictions of lot-drawing scenes reflect procedural fairness and transparency, suggesting that such imagery actively constructed public legitimacy rather than merely reflecting practice. The recurrent presence of Themis further embeds athletic competition within a cosmological and theological order, highlighting the integration of divine justice into sporting procedures.

Additionally, representations of wrestling scenes reveal the performative and embodied dimensions of ancient sport, while combined prize symbols wreaths, palm branches, amphorae, and money bags indicate a hybrid system integrating symbolic honor and material rewards. The appearance of the term IEROS underscores the hierarchical and institutionalized nature of festivals. Overall, the study demonstrates the value of numismatic evidence as a primary source, proposing a methodological model for reconstructing the cultural, ideological, and socio-economic foundations of ancient sport.

Keywords: *Pisidia, sport culture, numismatic, agonistic depictions, coins.*

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INTRODUCTION

The origins of agonistic festivals date back to the ancient Greek world. Although the word “agon” (ἀγών) carries many different meanings in Greek,

it is generally used in the literature to denote competition¹. However, the concept has a multi-layered structure that encompasses not only physical competition but also the struggle for social status, political rivalry, and the pursuit of cultural superiority². In this regard, *agon* is considered one of the fundamental dynamics of the individual's self-realization process within Agonistic Culture³. There are various views regarding both the origins and the exact start date of agonistic festivals⁴. However, the games held in Olympia which gave their name to the modern Olympic Games began in 776 BCE⁵. Additionally, the Pythian Games held in Delphi in honor of Apollo, the Nemean Games in Nemea, and the Isthmian Games near Corinth were among the most prestigious Panhellenic festivals of the ancient Greek world⁶. These festivals served not only as venues for athletic competition but also as spaces for religious rituals, political representation, and cultural exchange⁷. Consequently, in this context, sport emerges not as a matter of individual achievement but as a key component of collective identity-building.

In addition to these major festivals, over time many cities began organizing their own local festivals. This is because festivals, just as they do today, brought both prestige and economic revenue to the city. The ancient writer Dion Chrysostomos emphasized the importance of agones for the city's economy by noting that during the festival, merchants and local vendors could sell their goods, and artists, artisans, repairmen, and even cart drivers could find work⁸. This situation can be regarded as an early example of the economic function of sports organizations. In parallel with modern sports economics literature, it is understood that ancient agons were also organizations that fostered local development and commercial vitality⁹. By the Roman Imperial Period, there was a significant increase in the number of local festivals, a phenomenon described in the literature as an "agonistic boom"¹⁰. This process marked a critical turning point in the institutionalization of sports and its expansion across broader geographical areas. At the same time, this development demonstrates that sport evolved from being merely a religious practice to becoming a component of political legitimacy and imperial ideology¹¹.

This trend was also clearly evident in the Pisidia Region, located in southern Anatolia¹². Whether a city

organized agonistic festivals can be determined through the inscriptions and coins that have been discovered. Although various studies have been conducted on the inscriptions¹³ and coins found in the Pisidia Region, this topic has not yet been addressed from a sports history perspective using an interdisciplinary approach.

This study offers three significant contributions. First, it demonstrates the analytical value of coins as primary sources for reconstructing ancient sports systems. Second, it provides the first systematic sports-historical interpretation of Pisidian agonistic coins. Third, by developing a methodological framework that integrates material culture studies with sports history, it expands the analytical toolkit used in studies of ancient athletics.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on historical and iconographic analysis. The primary data consists of coins minted in the cities of Pisidia (including Ariassos, Baris, Etenna, Kremna, Palaionpolis, Prostanna, and Seleukeia Sidera) during the Roman Empire.

The dataset was compiled from published numismatic catalogs, museum collections, and digital databases such as the Roman Provincial Coins (RPC). Coins were selected based on the presence of identifiable agonistic imagery, including athletic figures, symbols of victory, and related inscriptions.

The analytical framework is based on an iconographic analysis comprising three stages:

- (1) Identification of visual elements (figures, objects, inscriptions),
- (2) Interpretation of symbolic meanings within their cultural and historical contexts, and
- (3) Contextualization within broader sports-historical and socio-political structures.

Furthermore, drawing on theoretical insights from material culture studies and representation theory, this study conceptualizes coins not as passive reflections of reality, but as active agents in the construction of meaning, identity, and legitimacy.

AGONISTIC TYPOLOGY AND ICONOGRAPHY IN PISIDIAN CITY COINS

Coins minted in the cities of Pisidia during the Roman Imperial period provide important numismatic data regarding the agonistic festivals held in the region. The iconographic elements featured on these coins reflect the cities' sporting events, types of competitions, and award systems. In particular, depictions of athletes, victory wreaths, amphorae, palm branches, and various agonistic symbols and inscriptions reveal the festivals organized by these cities and the role these events played in urban life. In this context, when evaluated within the framework of Visual Culture, these images should be interpreted not merely as

¹ HERODOT 6, 127.3.

² GOLDEN 2014: 3-5; KYLE 2015: 1-4.

³ KANSTEINER/BERGER 2022, 203-245.

⁴ For further discussion on this topic, see ALTIN 2015, P. 22, N. 119.

⁵ YOUNG 2004, 47-52.

⁶ For basic sources on the structure and disciplines of the Panhellenic festivals, see MILLER 2004; CROWTHER 2007.

⁷ For basic sources on the structure and disciplines of the Panhellenic festivals, see MILLER 2004; CROWTHER 2007.

⁸ DION. CHYRS. 27. 5-6; 35, 14-16; PRICE 2004; 188.

⁹ GRATTON/TAYLOR, 2000: 65-72.

¹⁰ ROBERT 1984, 38.

¹¹ PLEKET 1995, 151-171.

¹² The Pisidia region is a historical geographical area located in the rugged and mountainous terrain of the Taurus Mountains in the southern part of Anatolia. Today, this region encompasses the entire provinces of Isparta and Burdur in modern-day Türkiye, as well as the northern part of Antalya. For detailed information on the Pisidia region, see ÖZSAIT 1980; ÖZSAIT 1985.

¹³ COKBANKIR 2010; ALTIN 2015.

aesthetic elements but as symbolic forms of expression carrying ideological and social meanings.

The cities in the Pisidia region that minted agonistic coins include Ariassos, Baris, Etenna, Kremna, Palaiopolis, Prostanna, and Seleukeia Sidera. By examining the numismatic data of these cities within a specific iconographic framework, it is possible to gain detailed insight into the sporting culture of the period. In this context, coins can be evaluated not only as visual material but also as microhistorical data documenting the institutionalization process of sports from the perspective of sports historians. Among these cities, the coins of Baris, Prostanna, and Palaiopolis which feature similar depictions will be examined first. The coins of the city of Baris feature Severus Alexander¹⁴ (Fig. 1), while those of Prostanna feature Severus Alexander (222–235)¹⁵ (Fig. 2) and Gordianus III (238–244)¹⁶ (Fig. 3), and Palaiopolis's coins minted during the reign of Elagabalus (218–222)¹⁷ feature similar iconographic types.



Fig. 1. Baris
RPC VI, 5848



Fig. 2. Prostanna
RPC VI, 5856



Fig. 3. Prostanna
RPC VII.2, 2434

¹⁴ Laureate, draped and cuirassed bust of Severus Alexander, ΑΥΤ Κ Μ ΑΥ CE ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟC CE // Three nude athletes holding pebbles; the figures at right and left standing facing, the central figure standing facing left and placing a hand into a vase; above, agonistic crown ΒΑΡΗΝΩΝ ΘΕΜΙC. RPC VI, 5848; von Aulock 1979, 266–268.

¹⁵ Laureate, draped and cuirassed bust of Severus Alexander, ΑΥΤ Κ Μ ΑΥ CE ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟC CE // Three nude athletes holding pebbles; the figures at right and left standing facing, the central figure standing facing left and placing a hand into a vase; above, agonistic crown ΠΡΟΪΤΑΝΝΕΩΝ ΘΕΜΙC. RPC VI, 5856; von Aulock 1979, 1809.

¹⁶ Laureate, draped and cuirassed bust of Gordian III ΑΥΤ ΚΑΙ ΜΑΡ ΑΝΤ ΓΟΡΔΙΑΝΟC ΕΥ CE // Three nude athletes holding pebbles; the figures at right and left standing facing, the central figure standing facing left and placing a hand into a vase; above, agonistic crown ΠΡΟΪΤΑΝΝΕΩΝ ΘΕΜΙC. RPC VII.2, 2434; von Aulock 1979, 1816–17.

¹⁷ Radiate bust of Elagabalus r., ΑΥΤ Κ Μ ΑΥ ΑΝΤΩΝΕΙΝΟC // Three nude athletes holding pebbles; the figures at right and left standing facing, the central figure standing facing left and placing a hand into a vase; above, agonistic crown ΠΑΛΑΙΟΠΟΛΕΙΤΩΝ von Aulock 1977, 1107–1108.

The reverse side of these coins, minted in the cities of Baris and Prostanna, features three figures of naked athletes. The athlete in the center is drawing lots from an amphora on the ground, while the athletes positioned to his right and left are displaying the stones they have drawn to the crowd. The fact that the athletes in the scene are raising the stones in their palms outward toward the sky can be interpreted as a sign emphasizing the importance of transparency and honesty in ancient sports. This gesture demonstrates to both the judges and the spectators that no cheating has taken place in the competition. Thus, the iconography on the coin not only depicts an agonistic scene but also expresses the importance placed on justice and rules in ancient sports. In this regard, such scenes can be evaluated as visual representations of the early ethical codes of sport. The scene of a lottery draw seen on coins minted in the cities of Baris and Prostanna demonstrates that ancient sports organizations were based on the principles of randomness and justice. This reveals that sport was not merely a physical performance but also a practice conducted within an ethical framework. Indeed, in ancient Greek sports culture, the concept of “fair play” was accepted as one of the fundamental principles of competitions¹⁸. Consequently, the iconography on the coin not only depicts an agonistic scene but also expresses the importance ancient sports placed on justice and rules. In this context, the selection of the coin's design depicting the moment of the draw can also be interpreted as a propaganda tool used to assert that the festivals organized by the cities of Baris and Prostanna were free from fraud and conducted fairly. The inscription ΘΕΜΙC on the coin is the name given to these games and appears on most agonistic coins. The victory wreath at the top of the scene symbolizes the prize to be awarded to the winner of the upcoming competition.

On city coins from the reigns of Severus Alexander (222–235)¹⁹ of Baris and Elagabalus (218–222)²⁰ of Seleukeia Sidera, the figure of Themis is depicted seated on a throne in another coin type. The goddess is depicted resting one elbow on a palm-fringed laurel wreath atop a column, while placing an object (likely a lot-casting stone) into the lot-casting vase before her with her other hand. This is intended to demonstrate that the process was determined by Themis, the goddess of fate and justice, before the athletes were even involved in the lot-casting. The inclusion of the figure of Themis in the lottery process demonstrates that sport is associated with the concepts of divine order and fate. Themis's presence implies that competitions are based not only on human will but also on divine justice. This situation demonstrates that sport is associated with the concepts of divine order and fate. This context points to the sacred and ritualistic character of Ancient Greek sport²¹.

¹⁸ MILLER 2004, 44–49.

¹⁹ Laureate, draped and cuirassed bust of Severus Alexander r., ΑΥΤ Κ Μ ΑΥ CE ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟC CE // Themis seated, left, leaning elbow on agonistic crown with palm over column, holding hand over vase ΒΑΡΗΝΩΝ ΘΕΜΙC. RPC VI, 5849; Von Aulock 1979, 268.

²⁰ Laureate, draped and cuirassed bust of Elagabalus r., ΑΥΤ ΚΑΙC Μ ΑΥΡ ΑΝΤΩΝΕΙΝΟC // Themis seated, left, leaning elbow on agonistic crown with palm over column, placing globe in urn at her feet ΚΑΛΥΔΙΟCEΛΕΥΚΕΩΝ ΘΕΜΙC. RPC VI, 5817; Von Aulock 1979, 268.

²¹ KYLE 2015, 8–12.



Fig. 4. Baris
RPC VI, 5849



Fig. 5. Seleukeia Sidera
RPC VI, 5817

Ariassos, one of the cities of the Pisidia region, also provides direct information about the types of sports practiced in the city. On a coin type minted in Ariassos during the reign of Philip II (AD 247–249)²², two naked athletes are depicted wrestling in a locked-arm position (Fig. 6). The agonistic wreath at the top of the scene, containing two palm branches, symbolizes the prize for the contest. The presence of two palm branches within the victory wreath likely suggests that the games may have represented multiple categories such as different age groups or different disciplines and it would not be incorrect to interpret it this way. The wrestling scene depicted in Ariassos holds great significance as it offers a direct numismatic representation of ancient sports disciplines. Wrestling was one of the most prestigious disciplines in Ancient Greece, a sport that required not only physical strength but also technical skill and strategic intelligence²³. In this context, the depiction on the coin reflects not only a moment of competition but also the athletic ideals of the era.



Fig. 6. Ariassos
RPC VIII, 20820

A coin from Ariassos dating to the reign of Gordian III (AD 238–244) reflects a different stage of the agonistic process (Fig. 7). In this iconographic depiction, a lot-casting bowl is placed at the feet of the goddess Themis, who is seated on a throne; she is depicted extending the palm branch she holds in her hand toward a naked athlete standing before her²⁴.

²² Laureate, draped and cuirassed bust of Philip II r., K M IOY CEOYH ΦΙΛΙΠΠΟΣ ΣΕΒ // Two wrestlers; above, agonistic crown containing two palms ΑΡΙΑCCEΩΝ. RPC VIII, 20820; von Aulock 1977, 485-486; Tütüncü 2023, 258-261.

²³ POLIAKOFF 2021, 221-231.

²⁴ Laureate, draped and cuirassed bust of Gordian III r., ΑΥ ΚΑΙ ΜΑΡ ΑΝΤ ΓΟΡΔΙΑΝ [ΟC CE?] // Themis seated left on throne; ballot urn at her feet; holding palm branch and extending it toward a nude athlete standing opposite ΑΡΙΑCCEΩΝ. RPC VII.2, 2395; von Aulock 1977, 482; Tütüncü

This iconographic choice on the coin is related to the depictions of palm branches, which appear as a fixed element within the victory wreath in other competitive coins. The fact that the goddess Themis extends the palm branch in her hand directly to the athlete must symbolize that sacred moment when the prize promised before the competition is finally handed over to its owner. This suggests that in ancient sporting culture, success may have been associated not only with physical superiority but also with divine favor (Themis) that upheld justice from start to finish. In other words, the focal point of this scene is the conclusion of the contest and the presentation of the prize.



Fig. 7. Ariassos
RPC VII.2, 2395

The agonistic typology of the city of Ariassos reveals a different aspect of agonistic festivals through another coin minted during the reign of Philip I, (AD 244 – 249) which bears a depiction of his wife, Otacilia Severa²⁵. On the reverse of this coin, an agonistic wreath inscribed with ΘΕΜΙC (Themis) is depicted on a prize table. Two palm branches rising from within the crown are accompanied by money bags on either side of the table and an amphora depicted below (Fig. 8). The money bags depicted on the prize table and the amphora beneath it demonstrate that agonistic organizations were not merely prestige-oriented but also had a specific economic dimension. The money bags on either side of the table likely symbolize the material rewards offered to the winners. The amphora depicted below, meanwhile, suggests that in-kind prizes, such as high-quality olive oil, may have been awarded as part of the competition.



Fig. 8. Ariassos
RPC VIII, 20819

2023, 255.

²⁵ Diademed and draped bust of Otacilia Severa r., ΜΑΡΚΙΑΥΤΑ CEOYHPA CE // agonistic crown, inscribed, containing two palms and placed between two purses on table; beneath, amphora ΘΕΜΙC (on crown) ΑΡΕΑCCEΩΝ (sic). RPC VIII, 20819; von Aulock 1977, 483-484; Tütüncü 2023, 262-264.

In Kremna, another important center of Pisidia, it would not be inaccurate to say that the coins minted during the reign of Aurelian (A.D. 270–275)²⁶ (Fig. 9) represent the upper echelons of the region's competitive hierarchy. The inscription IEROS (sacred) within the laurel wreath on the coin indicates that these festivals, unlike other themis games, were associated with competitions of a higher status recognized by the empire. In antiquity, the designation of a competition as a hieros agon signified that the event enjoyed widespread prestige and that the winning athletes received various privileges throughout the empire.



Fig. 9. Kremna
RPC X, 63436

AN ANALYSIS OF NUMISMATIC DATA FROM SPORTS HISTORY PERSPECTIVE

This study aims to examine the agonistic representations on coins minted in the cities of Pisidia and to assess their significance within the broader framework of sports history. The findings demonstrate that these numismatic materials functioned not only as economic instruments but also as highly communicative artifacts that encoded the institutional, ideological, and socio-political dimensions of ancient athletic culture. From the perspective of sports history, coins provide rare and direct material evidence for understanding how athletic practices were organized, legitimized, and symbolically reproduced within local and imperial contexts.

Consistent with the literature, agonistic practices in antiquity extended far beyond physical competition, functioning as a constitutive principle of social life²⁷. Evidence from Pisidia reinforces this interpretation by demonstrating the continuity and transformation of agonistic ideology within the framework of the Roman Empire. In this context, athletic festivals and their depictions on coins emerge as mechanisms through which cities expressed their identities, negotiated their statuses, and positioned themselves within imperial hierarchies.

One of the most significant contributions of this study lies in the identification of visual narratives related to justice and institutional regulation. The depictions of lot-drawing scenes on coins from Baris and Prostanna demonstrate a formal concern with procedural justice and transparency

in athletic competitions. Such representations align with established interpretations of rule-based competition and adjudication in ancient athletics²⁸. Crucially, from a sports history perspective, these images should be interpreted not as passive reflections of practice but as active tools in the public construction of legitimacy. Consequently, the visualization of justice becomes a constitutive element of the agonistic system itself.

The recurring presence of Themis further deepens this interpretive framework by situating athletic competition within a cosmological and theological order. As previously emphasized in the literature, ancient sport was embedded in ritual and religious structures rather than existing as a purely secular domain²⁹. The integration of divine justice into athletic procedures demonstrates that legitimacy is not merely institutional but also metaphysical. From this perspective, sport functioned as an intermediary space between human action and the divine order, thereby reinforcing its central position within ancient cultural systems.

The depictions of wrestling scenes on coins minted in Ariassos provide further insight into the performative and physical dimensions of ancient sport. As Poliakoff³⁰ notes, in antiquity, combat sports were arenas where discipline, technique, and self-control were demonstrated rather than mere brute force. The selective representation of such disciplines in numismatic imagery demonstrates that cities actively shaped specific athletic identities. From a sports history perspective, this indicates that various sporting practices were strategically mobilized to reflect and reinforce civic values such as endurance, masculinity, and readiness for conflict.

Findings regarding prize structures are equally significant. The co-occurrence of wreaths, palm branches, amphorae, and money pouches indicates that agonistic festivals operated within a hybrid system that combined symbolic honor (timē) with material incentives. This challenges the traditional dichotomy between “amateur” Greek athletics and “professionalized” Roman spectacles. Instead, evidence from Pisidia supports interpretations that view ancient sport as a sphere of social mobility, arguing that successful athletes could accumulate prestige, wealth, and influence³¹.

Finally, the appearance of the inscription “IEROS” on coins minted at Kremna underscores the hierarchical and institutionalized nature of agonistic festivals. The designation of these competitions as “sacred” implies official recognition within a broader network of prestigious contests. From a macro-historical perspective, this supports the idea of an interconnected agonistic system in the Roman world, characterized by shared symbols, norms, and institutional frameworks. In this sense, the findings contribute to an understanding that could be termed “agonistic globalization” in antiquity.

²⁶ Laureate, draped and cuirassed bust of Aurelian r., IMP CS L DOM AVRELIANO // inscribed prize crown with two palm branches DONATIO COL IV A CREMNE, IEROS. RPC X, 63436, von Aulock 1979, 1600-1610, Akgönül 2025, 1218-1242.

²⁷ GOLDEN 2014, 3-6; KYLE 2015, 1-5.

²⁸ MILLER 2004, 44-49.

²⁹ KYLE 2015, 8-12.

³⁰ POLIAKOFF 2021, 221-231.

³¹ PLEKET 1995, 151-171.

Taken together, these findings underscore the value of numismatic evidence for the history of sport. Coins provide access to dimensions of athletic culture particularly at the local level that are often underrepresented in literary sources. By integrating iconographic analysis with theories of sports history, this study demonstrates that numismatic materials can serve as primary data for reconstructing the institutional, ideological, and socio-economic foundations of ancient sports.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Theoretically, this study contributes to the reconceptualization of ancient sport as a multidimensional cultural system. By situating numismatic evidence within the framework of agonistic culture, the findings align with the literature suggesting that sport functioned as a significant cultural structure in the ancient world for regulating social relations, producing legitimacy, and mediating between the human and divine realms³². Furthermore, by extending this framework to the context of the Roman Empire, the study highlights the continuity and adaptable transformation of agonistic ideology across time and space.

Another theoretical contribution lies in the integration of material culture into the analysis of sports history. By conceptualizing coins not as passive reflections of reality but as active agents in the production of meaning, this study aligns with broader interpretive approaches that emphasize the performative and communicative functions of visual media. In this sense, numismatic artifacts are not merely explanatory but also foundational elements of athletic culture, shaping perceptions of competition, justice, and prestige.

From a practical and methodological perspective, this study demonstrates the potential of interdisciplinary approaches that combine numismatics, iconography, and the history of sport. This integrated framework opens up new avenues for future research, particularly in regions where literary sources are limited. Comparative studies conducted across different provinces of the Roman Empire could further illuminate how local imagery on coins aligns with various athletic traditions and political strategies.

Furthermore, the findings encourage a reevaluation of existing narratives of sports history, which rely primarily on elite literary sources. The inclusion of material evidence, such as coins, enables a more nuanced and inclusive reconstruction of ancient athletic culture, particularly at the civic and regional levels.

In conclusion, this study not only fills a gap in the literature but also proposes a methodological model that could be termed “numismatic sports historiography.” By highlighting the analytical value of coins, it contributes to a more comprehensive and theoretically informed understanding of ancient sports and their role within broader cultural and political systems.

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³² GOLDEN 2014, 3–6; KYLE 2015, 8–12.

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