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A Unique Gold Stater of the Bosporan King Asander

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During the 2006 excavations of the Greek-Scythian settlement Kara-Tobe, situated in the North-Western Crimea, a gold stater of the Bosporan king Asander dated to the 8th year of his reign was found. It is the first find of a gold coin of this ruler from a documented archaeological context.

Obverse: Diademed head of Asander r.

Reverse: Nike standing on prow l., holding wreath and palm-branch; to l., H (8); ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΣΑΝΔΡΟΥ. 8.17 g; diameter 20 mm; die-axis 12 (Fig. 1).

Ancient sources inform us that a certain Asander, who had been appointed by the Bosporan ruler Pharnaces (elder son of Mithradates VI) as the king's representative (ἐπίτροπος) during Pharnaces' anti-Roman campaign in Asia Minor, revolted against his master and proclaimed himself an independent ruler (App. Mithr. 110; Dio Cass. XLII. 46, 4–47; Ps.-Luc. Macr. 17). In the subsequent struggle he managed to defeat Pharnaces and Julius Caesar's protégé Mithradates of Pergamon (who had been given the Bosporan kingdom by Julius Caesar and sent by him against Asander after the death of Pharnaces). Asander later married the daughter of Pharnaces, Dynamis. He died at the age of 93.

Apart from these texts, gold and bronze coins with the name of Asander are another source of information about this enigmatic personage. Bronze coins of two denominations with images of Nike's head on the obverse and a prow on the reverse bear the legend ΑΡΧΟΝΤΟΣ ΑΣΑΝΔΡΟΥ. Gold staters are confined to two groups. Staters of the first group have on the obverse a male head and on the reverse Nike with a wreath and palm-branch standing on a prow. The legend, ΑΡΧΟΝΤΟΣ ΑΣΑΝΔΡΟΥ ΒΟΣΠΙΟΡΟΥ, is accompanied by a letter indicating the year from 1 to 4 (ΕΤ[ΟΥΣ] Α to Δ) in the field. The second group (to which our coin belongs) is represented by coins with the obverse portrait of Asander wearing a diadem, and the same reverse as the coins of the first group but with a different legend, ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΣΑΝΔΡΟΥ, together with the year's indication from 4 to 29 (Δ to ΘΚ).

The coins then indicate that Asander ruled over the Bosphorus for 29 years, firstly as archon and then as a king.¹ In contrast to Pharnaces and Dynamis who dated their coins according to the Pontic era, Asander marked his coinage with the years of his own reign. As we do not possess reliable information concerning the exact date on which he came to power, the chronology of



Figure 1. Gold stater of the Bosphoran king Asander

his reign has been the subject of great controversy.² The recent find of a unique stater of queen Dynamis dated to 21/20 BC³, has led some scholars to put forward the hypothesis that Asander came to the throne in 50/49 or 49/48 BC.⁴ These scholars believe that Dynamis was only able to start issuing gold coins in her own name after the death of her husband, Asander, when she became sole ruler. They thus reach a starting point for his reign by counting back 29 years from the date of the first of Dynamis' staters. Numismatic evidence from various places, however, indicates that the queen might have minted coins during her husband's lifetime.⁵ This is confirmed by an inscription where Dynamis is mentioned as co-ruler with Asander.⁶ It is important to note that a study of the ancient texts and of the general historical situation in the Black Sea region and Asia Minor in the second half of the 1st century BC demonstrates, in our

opinion, that Asander could hardly have accepted the title of archon and started minting his own gold coins before the death of Julius Caesar in March 44 BC. As Strabo directly mentions that the Bosphorus since the time of Mithridates VI was a subject of Rome (VII.4.4) such an action would have meant a direct challenge to Rome. Frequent Roman interference in Bosphoran affairs in the 1st century BC also hardly agrees with the hypothesis of total Bosphoran independence at that time.⁷ Moreover, putting on the obverses of the first gold coins with archon's title supposed portraits of the powerful Romans (either those of Caesar, Octavian or Antonius) clearly demonstrates Asander's loyalty to Rome and his wish to obtain its favour.⁸ Thus, if the first staters with the name of Asander as archon were issued at the earliest in 44/43 BC then his last coins (the 29th year) should be dated from 16/15 BC at the earliest.⁹ In this case the stater of the 8th year of king Asander found at Kara-

Tobe might be dated from 37/36 BC.

Until this present find, gold staters of Asander marked with year 8 of his reign were unknown. One could have predicted their existence, however, for there had already been mention of staters of this very year in numismatic literature from the end of the 18th century.¹⁰ But these references were either the result of an incorrect reading of the date of genuine coins, or the coins themselves were forgeries.¹¹ A lead proof of an Asander stater of the year 8, for example, was acquired in 1974 by the American Numismatic Society.¹² In the corpus of Bosporan coins presented by N Frolova in 1997, 55 gold coins of Asander staters were cited but not one was dated year 8.¹³ Thus for the moment the gold stater found at Kara-Tobe is the only known specimen marked with year 8. A previously unknown obverse die was used to mint this coin. This die was cut, however, by the same engraver who made obverse dies for the staters of years 6–7 and 9; this is demonstrated by a stylistic similarity and by the minute repetition of all details of the king's portrait. K Nawotka has pointed out that the different levels of production for Asander's gold issues reflects not only the variable demands of the Bosporan market but also changes to the amount of precious metal available for this coinage.¹⁴ The absence of dated gold coins from particular years could be explained by the existence of plentiful supplies from previous issues.¹⁵

The gold stater from Kara-Tobe is well preserved; it is almost uncirculated and thus there should not have been a large time span between its striking and the moment of its accidental loss i.e., the moment when the coin got into an

archaeological layer. The rarity of such finds from systematic archaeological investigations is also noteworthy; the bronze coins of Asander, in contrast, are quite often found in the Chersonesos and could be considered to be the result of trade links between the Chersonesos and the Bosphorus. The gold coin from Kara-Tobe perhaps indicates that relations of another sort existed between the two states. Strabo informs us that in his time the Chersonesos was subordinate to the Bosporan kings (VII. 4. 3) but the exact date when this domination was established is still the subject of controversy.

Obviously it occurred (ἐλευθερία) after Caesar's death as he granted freedom to the Chersonesos in 45 BC.¹⁶ The discovery of a gold coin of Asander dated to 37/36 BC at the settlement of Kara-Tobe (situated in the former far chora of the Chersonesos in the North-Western Crimea) helps us to narrow the date, for the find suggests that at this time, approximately, the Chersonesos itself and its previous possessions elsewhere were already under Bosporan control. In view of these findings, the gold coin of Asander from year 8 could be considered to be evidence for state payments made by the Bosporan rulers to the people of the Chersonesos (but not vice versa).

It seems indicative that such a find should have been made at the settlement of Kara-Tobe; in antiquity this site occupied a very important strategic position for it controlled roads connecting North-Western Crimea with central areas of the peninsula and the Chersonesos and has been identified by some scholars as ancient Eupatorion founded by Diophantos, the strategos of Mithradates VI, and mentioned by Strabo

(VII. 4. 7).

Notes

1. Scholars have proved that the numbering of the years of Asander's reign on his coins did not start again after he accepted the king's title, but continued until the end of his reign: A Sallet, *Beiträge zur Geschichte und Numismatik der Könige des Cimmerischen Bosporos und des Pontos* (Berlin, 1866), 15; R Hennig, 'Die Regierungszeit des Asander', *Berliner Münzblätter* 78–79 (1908), 86–87.
2. History of this problem: S Saprykin, *The Kingdom of Bosphorus on the Verge of Two Epochs* (Moscow, 2002), 57–59.
3. Found in 1983: S Saprykin, 'Unique stater of Bosphoran queen Dynamis', *Soviet Archaeology* 3 (1990), 204–214.
4. V Anokhin, *Coinage of Bosphorus* (Kiev, 1986), 78; P Karyshkovskii, N Frolova, 'On the history of Asander's reign in Bosphorus', *Numismatic Studies on the History of South-Eastern Europe* (Kishinev, 1990), 93–97; N Frolova, *Coinage of Bosphorus (middle of the 1st cent. BC—middle of the 4th cent. AD)* (Moscow, 1997), 14f.
5. K Nawotka, 'Asander of the Bosphorus: His Coinage and Chronology', *AJN* Second Series 3–4 (1991–92), 30–31; U Kahrstedt, 'Frauen auf antiken Münzen', *Klio* 10 (1910), 311.
6. M Rostovtzeff, 'Queen Dynamis of Bosphorus', *JHS* 39 (1919), 99.
7. *RE* 3, s.v. 'Bosphorus', cols. 778–779 (Brandis); K Nawotka, 'Asander of the Bosphorus', 33–34.
8. *Ibid.*, 40–41.
9. K Nawotka, 'Asander of the Bosphorus', 42; S Saprykin, *The Kingdom of Bosphorus*, 71–72.
10. Eckhel, *Doctrina numorum veterum* II (Wien, 1794), 368.
11. T Mionnet, *Description de Médailles Antiques, Grecques et Romaines* Supplement IV (Paris, 1829), 474, no. 42; H Köhler, 'Suite des médailles d'Asandre, d'abord archonte, après roi du Bosphore-Cimmérien', *Serapis* II (1850), 74, no. 19; R Hennig, 'Die Regierungszeit des Asander', 91.
12. *ANS* 74. 226. 33—K Nawotka, 'Asander of the Bosphorus', 43, no. 8a.
13. 'coins of this year are unknown'—N Frolova, *Coinage of Bosphorus*, 168.
14. K Nawotka, 'Asander of the Bosphorus', 26.
15. *Ibid.*, 24–26; N Frolova, *Coinage of Bosphorus*, 165–174. By now coins of years 5, 15, 24 and 26 are unknown.
16. M Rostovtzeff, 'Caesar and the South of Russia', *JRS* 7 (1917), 28–29.

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