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Zeus Kasios and the Baetyl of Sidon: Two New Coins at ACANS

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Amongst the acquisitions of the *Australian Centre for Ancient Numismatic Studies* (ACANS) last year were two Roman provincial bronze coins, minted in Seleuceia Pieria and Sidon. Both were purchased with funds generously made available by the Society for the Study of Early Christianity, Macquarie University. Both coins are of particular significance as markers of imperial interest in the area and are indicative of the role of local cults in the formulation and expression of identity.¹ A cult image is often chosen to grace the reverse of provincial issues and these two coins provide no exception.

1.) Coin of Seleuceia Pieria from the time of Trajan (Figure 1)

Obverse: AVTOKP KAIC NEP TPAIANOC APICT CEB ΓEPM ΔAK. Head of Trajan, laureate, right, border of dots.

Reverse: CEΛEYKEΩN ΠIEPIAC.

Sacred stone of Zeus Kasios with fillet within a shrine consisting of four pillars that support a pyramidal roof surmounted by an eagle. Beneath the image ΔEYΣ KACIOC, bead and reel border.

Die Axis: 11 o'clock

Weight: 11.57g.

ACANS No: 05A21.

(cf. BMC, *Syria*, 36 and 43).

The letter indicating date, normally placed in the field of this series has worn away on this specimen.

This issue is the first representation of the deity Zeus Kasios on the coinage of Seleuceia Pieria. The city itself has a long history as a mint, striking coins in both the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The possible motivation behind the introduction of this new type is consequently of interest.

The legend identifies the image as Zeus Kasios, a deity probably associated with Mount Casius, which was located near the city. Whilst many describe the object inside the shrine as a *baetyl*, it is just as likely that what is represented is the mountain itself, or an *agalma* (cult image) of it.² Such a phenomenon was not unheard of in antiquity: Caesaria minted coins depicting Mount Argaeus. Indeed, the circular cavity present at the top of the object on this coin sets it apart from other depictions of *baetyls* and is more suggestive of a mountainside with a cave in it.³ What is represented on the coin may be the mountain itself, or, more likely, a shrine located on it. Coins minted under Elagabalus (e.g. SNG *Cop.* 410) show the object with rocks below it, supporting the latter interpretation. This shrine is also attested in literary evidence—the *Historia*



Figure 1. Coin of Seluceia Pieria.

Augusta records a sacrifice of Hadrian on Mount Casius (14.3), while Ammianus (22.14.4) records a similar act undertaken by Julian in AD 363.

Zeus Kasios was an old deity associated with the city since its foundation, though the god did not appear on civic coinage of the city until the reign of Trajan. It is fruitful to consider the possible motivations behind this sudden change.

The most likely catalyst is the Parthian wars of Trajan. On their way to the eastern frontier, both Trajan and Hadrian stopped at Seleuceia Pieria, which was an important naval station for Antioch and the East.⁴ While in the city it appears that both Hadrian and Trajan visited the shrine on Mount Casius to pray for victory in the coming campaign. Hadrian composed a poem (*Anthologia Palatina* 6.332) detailing the event, stating that Trajan dedicated spoils from his victory over the Dacians to Zeus Kasios. The decision by

Zeus Kasios seems to be confirmation of this event.

The dating of the coin, struck just before the Parthian war, strengthens this interpretation. The coin lists the emperor's titles as *APICT CEB ΓΕΡΜ ΔΑΚ*, a Greek translation of the imperial Latin titles *Optimus Augustus Germanicus Dacius* (the latter two titles granted to Trajan after the emperor's victories in Germany and Dacia). It is noteworthy that the emperor's title *optimus princeps* (expressed as *aristos* in Greek) was not fully incorporated into the obverse legend of coins until AD 114. The title, designating the emperor as the best of emperors, was granted to Trajan by the senate and is indicative of his popularity as a ruler. Thus this series of coins must have been minted after AD 114 (*APICT*) and before the emperor's assumption of the title *Parthicus* in AD 116. It was during this period that the emperor visited Seluceia

Seleuceia Pieria to mint coins depicting

Pieria, and his sacrifice to Zeus Kasios would form the prime motivation for



Figure 2. Coin of Sidon.

striking coins of the god's image.

2.) Coin of Sidon from the time of Elagabalus (Figure 2)

Obverse: IM C M AV ANTONINVS AVG [PIV?]

Bust of Elagabalus, r., laureate, wearing paludamentum and cuirass.

Reverse: AVR PIA SID COL METRO
Spherical object (baetyl?) placed on a draped base, flanked by horns and surmounted by a double cap/crown. The object is within a shrine with two wheels, with four columns supporting the roof, above which emerge two palm branches. Dotted lines of ornament are visible on the body and roof of the shrine.

Die Axis: 1 o'clock

Weight: 18.84g

ACANS No: 05A22

(cf. BMC *Phoenicia* 244)

of debate. Traditionally the object has been seen as connected with the Phoenician goddess Astarte. Philo of Byblos states that Astarte 'found a star fallen from the air, which she picked up and consecrated in the holy island of Tyre.'⁴ Scholars have thus seen on the coins of Sidon a meteorite associated with the goddess Astarte, or a non-anthropomorphic figure of Astarte herself. Unfortunately Philo's statement concerns not Sidon, but Tyre, whose own coins also show a baetylic object that can be easily linked with the story. It is noteworthy that Lucian, who remains the best literary source for the temple to Astarte in Sidon, contains no mention of a baetyl or sacred object to the goddess. Rather he suggests that in Sidon the goddess had become syncretised with Europa, a phenomenon also portrayed on coinage.⁵

The precise nature of the object shown on the reverse of this coin remains a matter

The object at the centre of the reverse type has variously been identified as an

object sacred to Ashtart, a solar ‘heavenly sphere’ and a *baetyl*. None of these hypotheses are particularly convincing and, given the state of modern knowledge on the religion of Sidon, concrete understanding of the object remains unlikely.

The Latin title COLONIA proclaimed on this coin was granted to Sidon by Elagabalus, probably in recognition of the support of the city during his war with Macrinus. The description of the city as AVR PIA (*Aurelia Pia*, referring to Elagabalus, whose official name was Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Pius) designates a special relationship with the emperor that would be fitting with honours granted as a result of support in a civil war. This increased status would also have been motivation to strike coinage; the city strikes a variety of types under this emperor. The title METROPOLIS also appears for the first time, though it is impossible to know whether this was an official title awarded by Elagabalus, or whether Sidon was merely proclaiming her position as the ‘mother-city’ of other Phoenician colonies.⁶ The title originally indicated that the city had been responsible for the settlement of another; during the Roman period it was an honorary title normally granted to capitals of *koina* or to cities of importance. It was the subject of considerable competition amongst neighbouring Greek cities, for instance both Tyre and Sidon claimed to be a *metropolis*.

from that seen on Roman Imperial coinage. Towards the end of his reign Elagabalus’ official portrait undergoes a change, and a protrusion is seen coming from his head, variously identified as a horn, a bull’s phallus and in index finger by modern scholars.⁷ Despite the obscurity of the actual nature of this object it is generally believed to be associated with Elagabalus’ role as the high priest of Emesa. What is significant is that this particular portrayal of the emperor is *never* seen on provincial coins such as the one illustrated here. The phenomenon might be explained by revulsion at the excessive piety of the emperor towards a strange deity, but it is unlikely that the populace of Sidon would have found the worship of a *baetyl* at all unusual. It may be that the images of the emperor with a ‘horn’ were released so close to his assassination that the provincial die cutters had no time to adapt their portraiture. Stylistic examinations of Elagabalus’ coinage suggest that the ‘horn’ did not appear on his portraiture until AD 220. The images may also not have been released in large quantities. An examination of the Reka-Devnia hoard shows that of the 4010 coins of Elagabalus, only approximately 627 coins had the image of Elagabalus with a ‘horn’. Whatever the reason, the divergence between the imperial and provincial traditions of this emperor’s portraiture is of interest.

The portraiture of Elagabalus on this coin and other provincial issues diverges

Notes

1. For a discussion of this phenomenon see A Burnett, *Roman Provincial Coinage Vol 2*, London, 1999, 33.

2. K Butcher, *Coinage in Roman Syria*, London, 2004, 412.
3. This circular cavity is located more centrally on the object on other coins, arguing for its interpretation as a cave on the mountainside. See *Münzen & Medaillen Deutschland GmbH*, Auction 11, #160, *Dr. Busso Peus Nachfolger*, Auction 366, #1128.
4. John Malalas 270.
5. Philo 811: 24 trans. Baumgarten in A I Baumgarten, *The Phoenician History of Philo of Byblos*, Leiden, 1981, 215.
6. Lucian, *De Dea Syria* 4. For Europa on the coins of Sidon see B.L. Trell, 'Architectura Numismatica Orientalis: A Short Guide to the Numismatic Formulae of Roman Syrian Die-Makers', *Numismatic Chronicle* 10 (1970) 29ff.
7. K Butcher, *op.cit.* 221.

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