

THE COINS FROM EL-KABRI

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Twelve coins were retrieved from the El-Kabri tombs (Stern and Getzov, this volume).¹ Most of the coins were found probably in or near their original location, since the tombs had not been disturbed by ancient or modern looting. Many of the coins were heavily worn and could be dated only by their general physical resemblance to contemporaneous city coins. The identifiable coins date to the second and third centuries CE and most are common in the Galilee, especially western Galilee. The catalogue below describes nine of the coins. Square brackets in the text indicate catalogue numbers.

Tomb 9 yielded four coins: two identical autonomous bronzes from the mint of Tyre [1, 2], dated to the early second century CE, and two Roman Provincial coins [7, 8], one dated to the early third century and the other to the mid-third century CE. The Tyrian coins were almost completely worn. The third century coins were recovered from sifting; their original burial positions are unknown.

Tomb 10 yielded five coins. An unidentifiable coin was found on the tiles covering Coffin A. Three second century Roman Provincial coins [3–5] were found within the coffin, but not on its floor. They may have originally been placed on the cover tiles and fallen inside the coffin when the tiles collapsed. Two of these [3, 5] were found stuck together. Another coin [6], probably dating to the reign of Septimius Severus (193–211 CE), was found on the floor of Coffin A, in which remains of an articulated skeleton of a female were found. The relative position of the skull fragments, two bracelets, and the coin indicate that the deceased, who was placed on her back, wore two bracelets on her right arm and held the coin in her right

hand. This find is associated with the custom of providing the deceased with Charon's obol (see below).

Tomb 11 yielded two coins: a second century CE Roman Provincial coin and an *antoninianus* of the eastern usurper Quietus, who ruled with his brother Macrianus a little less than a year (260–261 CE).

The Late Islamic burial (T14) yielded an unidentifiable, probably Ottoman coin.

DISCUSSION

Charon's obol,² originally a classical Greek mythological theme, is referred to in ancient Greek and Latin literature as the payment required by the ferryman Charon to reach the mythological underworld. The latest mention of the custom is by the second-century CE Latin author Apuleius (*Metamorphoses* VI:18). In the classical theme, the obol, or a low value copper coin in general, should be placed in the mouth of the deceased immediately after death.

The archaeological record provides us with a wealth of coins found in tombs but it would be incorrect to associate all of them with this custom. Indeed, at least in Greece, the custom of providing the dead with coins is older than the mythological tradition of Charon (Stevens 1991:227). It seems that the custom underwent considerable changes in the Roman and Byzantine periods. Originally, Charon's obol was placed in the mouth or clenched between the teeth; in later burials, we find coins placed on the eyes or in the hand (Stevens 1991:225). There were also changes as to when the coin was placed (at death or upon burial) and the number of coins. Charon did not exist in the

Roman religious tradition. By the third century CE, the origins of the custom may already have become obscure for the Hellenized population of the Levant.

The custom can be unequivocally recognized in the archaeological record if a coin is found within the skull, clenched between the teeth, or held in the hand, or, if the bones have deteriorated, in the reconstructed position of these body parts. Unfortunately, more often than not, looting disturbed the original position of the finds. Therefore, coins cannot be definitively associated with the custom, even if found near the body, and are usually recorded as 'grave offerings'. The present find is a rare illustration of a custom that was apparently far more widespread than could have been estimated based on the archaeological record alone. Many examples of the custom have been recorded in Israel. For example, coins were found in the mouth of the deceased at Gesher Ha-Ziv (Mazar 1994:78, eight examples) and Loḥame Ha-Geta'ot (Peleg 1991:133, four examples); clenched between the teeth at Nahariyya (Barag 1986:399) and Mampsis (Negev 1971:119); placed on the eyes at Ḥurfeish (Shaked 2000) and 'En Boqeq (Gichon 1970:139); or held in the hand, as at Loḥame Ha-Geta'ot (Peleg 1991:133).³

While the finding of a coin in the right hand of the skeleton in Coffin A of Tomb 10 unequivocally indicates Charon's obol, a scaraboid bead carved with a menorah was found on the chest of the same skeleton. This typically Jewish find is inconsistent with the finding of Charon's obol (Hachlili 1999:135–136; Rahmani 1993), a pagan custom that is only sporadically attested in Jewish burials (Greenhut 1992:70; Hachlili 1999:135).⁴ The relative abundance of Charon's obols, or coins in general, in western Galilee burials underscores the pagan identity of the inhabitants.

Chronologically, the coins represent a period of activity beginning around 100 CE and ending about 260 CE. It is numismatically possible to reduce this range based on the fact that the majority of the coins were worn from use (four

were worn beyond legibility), suggesting that they had circulated a long time and were placed in the tombs as much as decades after minting. The coin in the hand of the woman in T10 [6] is partly worn, dating her burial to the first, or even second, quarter of the third century CE, even though the coin was minted under Septimius Severus (193–211 CE). The wear of the coins suggests that all the burial activity in the excavated tombs took place in the third century CE.

In addition to Charon's obol, it was customary to place coins in tombs as offerings. Whether intended as Charon's obol or an offering, it is reasonable to assume that old and worn coins were chosen to leave with the dead, as they would have been valued less than newer coins (Howgego 1985:11).⁵ The lower value of worn coins is evident in the fact that some of them [4, 5] were countermarked to return the coins to circulation.

The practice of using worn coins as grave offerings is recorded from many excavations and probably was much more widespread than documented. The following examples are from the Galilee: Ḥanita (Barag 1978:48), Ḥurfeish (Ariel 1997:35; Syon 2002), Gesher Ha-Ziv (Ariel 1994), Akhziv (Abu 'Uqsa 2000a), Nahariyya (Syon, forthcoming), Tell er-Ras (Bijovsky 1999:155–156) and Yafi'a (Abu 'Uqsa 2000b). In all these examples, the majority of the extremely worn coins are the Melqart/Club type autonomous issues of Tyre of the early second century, and many have one or more countermarks. The choice of this type of coin probably reflects the need for a relatively large coin. In contrast to third century city coins that, in general, were rather large, first and second century coins appeared in several denominations. The Tyrian Melqart/Club type was among the largest and most common.

In the present excavation five or six of the coins are from the mint of Tyre, while only three are from the closer mint of 'Akko-Ptolemais. The dominance of Tyrian coins in the Galilee in the Persian through Roman periods has been known for some time and was discussed

by Kindler (1967), Hanson (1980) and Barag (1983). However, today's far greater database permits viewing this as an almost sweeping phenomenon in both settlements and tombs throughout the Galilee, with the boundaries of this dominance varying in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman periods (Syon 2004).

CATALOGUE

1. Reg. No. 307, L94 (T9), IAA 82696.

Autonomous, Tyre (93–136 CE).

Obv.: Head of Melqart r. (obliterated).

Rev.: ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΕΩΣ Traces of a club in a wreath. Date illegible.

Æ, 8.24 g, 21 mm.

Cf. *BMC Phoen*: 259–260: Nos. 288–298.

2. Reg. No. 384, L94 (T9), IAA 82699.

Autonomous, Tyre (93–136 CE).

Obv.: Head of Melqart r.

Rev.: ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΕΩΣ Club in a wreath. Date illegible.

Æ, ↑, 10.57 g, 21 mm.

Cf. *BMC Phoen*: 259–260: Nos. 288–298.

3. Reg. No. 340, L102 (T10), IAA 82702.

Autonomous, Tyre, 155/6 CE.

Obv.: Head of Melqart r.

Rev.: ΜΗ–ΤΡΟ / ΠΟΛ–ΕΩΣ / ΑΠΣ – לצר Club in wreath.

Æ, ↑, 9.13 g, 21 mm.

Cf. *BMC Phoen*: 264: No. 335.



4. Reg. No. 311, L102 (T10), IAA 82700.

Probably autonomous issue of Tyre.

Obv.: Traces of head; unidentified rectangular countermark.

Rev.: Obliterated.

Æ, 5.79 g, 23 mm.

5. Reg. No. 339, L102 (T10), IAA 82701.

‘Akko-Ptolemais, second century CE.

Obv.: Illegible inscription; faint traces of head. Two rectangular countermarks: winged thunderbolt and unidentified object.

Rev.: Illegible inscription. Tyche, seated on rock r. (very worn).

Æ, ↑, 9.38 g, 23 mm.

Cf. Kadman 1961:114, No. 112. The type is common to this mint in the second century CE, as is the winged thunderbolt countermark (Kadman 1961: Nos. 98, 105; Howgego 1985:195, Nos. 472, 474).

6. Reg. No. 358, L103 (T10), IAA 82703.

Septimius Severus(?) (193–211), ‘Akko-Ptolemais.

Obv.: Illegible inscription; head r.

Rev.: COL [PTOL] Tyche, seated on rock r. Below: the river-god Belus.

Æ, ↑, 11.37 g, 26 mm.

Cf. Kadman 1961:114, No. 120 for the obverse. The reverse type is common (see No. 5). Apparently unpublished for Septimius Severus.

7. Reg. No. 357, L91 (T9), IAA 82698.

Elagabalus, Tyre, 219–222 CE.

Obv.: ...ANTONINOS AV Bust r., cuirassed.

Rev.: TYRIO[RVM] Tyche facing, head l., standing on ship's prow, placing r. hand on trophy. On r., small Nike on a column holding wreath. On l., palm tree. Below r., murex shell(?).

Æ, ↑, 14.04 g, 27 mm.

Cf. *BMC Phoen*: 275: Nos. 396–403.

8. Reg. No. 356, L91 (T9), IAA 82697.

Gallienus (?) (253–268 CE), ‘Akko-Ptolemais.



Obv.: ...NVSA Head r., radiate.

Rev.: COL P-[TO]L Tyche facing, wearing long chiton. Leaning with her r. hand on rudder, in her l. hand cornucopia. On r. small Nike on column. On top l., caduceus.

Æ, ↑, 13.93 g, 27 mm.

Cf. Kadman 1961:142, No.251.

9. Reg. No. 393, L76 (T11), IAA 82704.

Quietus (260–261), Antioch.

Obv.: [IMP C FVL] QUIETVS PF AVG Bust r., radiate, draped.

Rev.: [AP]OLINI CONSER[VA] Naked, laureate Apollo facing, head l. In his lowered r. hand a branch, resting l. hand on lyre. In field l., star.

Billon *antoninianus*, ↑, 3.26 g, 20 mm.

RIC 5/2:582, No.3. The coins of this usurper are fairly rare in Israel. Though his reign was short,

a large quantity of coinage was apparently minted in his name to pay for his military activities in the east. So far the largest number of his coins have been found in the Galilee: eight from the excavations at Susita-Hippas, carried out in 1951 by Dothan and Epstein (unpublished; perhaps from a hoard), one from Bar'am (Syon, forthcoming), and one from H. Ikrit.⁶ At present, it is difficult to assess the significance of these finds, but they are likely connected with troop movements.



NOTES

¹ The coins were cleaned by M. Levine, IAA laboratories.

² The following discussion borrows much from Stevens (1991), who discusses the practice in depth and provides further bibliography. For a short overview of the origins of the practice see Rahmani (1993).

³ The 'coin in the hand' example from Loḥame Ha-Geta'ot is remarkable in another way. In this fourth century CE burial (R), the deceased held five coins in his clenched right hand, an extraordinary illustration of the sharp decline of the value of money beginning in the late third century. Earlier, one coin was usually deemed sufficient for Charon's fare, but it took five coins in the fourth century. While multiple coins in the mouth occur sporadically in classical-period tombs, in the fourth–fifth centuries CE there is a marked increase in the quantity of coins found in

tombs (Stevens 1991:223–226). While noting the fact, Stevens failed to suggest the connection of the phenomenon with inflation. Tombs with many fourth century CE coins are recorded in Israel without the possibility of linking the coins to the custom of Charon's obol.

⁴ Three of the four coins found at Jericho (Hachlili 1999) were Charon's obols, as they were found in skulls. This exception, among the hundreds of Jewish burials excavated in Jericho, proves the rule.

⁵ Howgego (1985:9, 178 No. 385) also observes that countermarking seems, in some cases, to have lowered the value of a coin by stamping them with a design normally found on coins of a lower denomination.

⁶ The coin is mentioned courtesy of F. Vitto, the excavator, and G. Bijovsky who studied the coins.

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