

The chronology of Ephesos revisited

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THE CHRONOLOGY OF EPHEOS REVISITED*

1 Introduction

Among the later Hellenistic coinages, the dated cistophori of Ephesos play a particularly important role. The main reason for this comes from the fact that they form the longest coin series of Asia Minor carrying dates in the form of letters. These range, in a nearly uninterrupted sequence, first from A (= 1) to EZ (= 67), and then, in a modified form, from OC (= 76) to ΠC (= 86).

Thanks to the very useful review article of F.S. Kleiner we now have a convenient and reliable summary of the present knowledge on the dated Ephesian cistophori, although it is limited to the pre-consular period, i.e. to our first group. Kleiner's dating of the initial issue, with year mark A to 134/33 BC, fixes the chronology of the series as a whole. He considers it as the era of the Roman province of Asia.

In the first group of 67 years, 9 numbers are lacking at present;¹ they correspond to the years 18, 20, 37, 42, 43, 58, 59, 60 and 62. In view of both this distribution and the small number of coins recorded per year, especially among the later ones, it seems justified to assume that the original series of issues was without interruption and that some of the year numbers still lacking will turn up in new finds. The situation is similar for the second group which apparently lasted for only 11 years and where, for the time being, the years 82 to 85 are absent.

As the cistophori of Ephesos often appear together with other coins, they are commonly used to determine the burial date of a hoard or the years of issue of other coins. This gives to the dated coins an importance which goes far beyond the territory of Ephesos.

* This article is respectfully dedicated to Georges Le Rider, on the occasion of his 70th birthday, in admiration of his work.

Bibliography

- Kleiner F.S. Kleiner, *The Dated Cistophori of Ephesus*, ANSMN 18, 1972, p. 17-32
Stumpf G.R. Stumpf, *Numismatische Studien zur Chronologie der römischen Stadthalter in Kleinasien* (Saarbrücken 1991).

¹ Year number 27 was found recently: Auction Class. Num. Group 35, 1995, no. 283; see now also SNG Sweden II: 2, n° 186.



Fig. 1a



Fig. 1b

2 Some simple facts

Obviously, the basic question concerns the reliability of the adopted absolute dating. Which were the exact reasons for choosing the year 134/33 BC as the starting point? Curiously enough, this critical point is not really discussed by Kleiner. The question then arises whether there exists independent evidence for the correctness of this choice, perhaps from our general knowledge of the history of this period or from the coins themselves.

After 60 BC the names of the Roman proconsuls of the province Asia regularly appear on the cistophori. These coins form our second group. *Fig. 1* illustrates both groups by an example. As Ephesus was essentially still the only town of the province of Asia issuing dated coins, they alone can be used for chronological purposes. By applying the same starting point as for the first group, the information on Roman magistrates listed in Table 1 can be obtained from the earliest issues of coins of the second group.

Table 1: Some names of the Roman proconsuls appearing on dated Ephesian cistophori (assembled from Stumpf).

year number	date (BC)	name(s)
76	59/58	T. Ampius Balbus
77	58/57	T. Ampius Balbus, C. Fabius
78	57/56	C. Fabius, C. Septumius
79	56/55	C. Septumius
80	55/54	C. Claudius Pulcher
...

These datings of the provincial governors, and also those appearing on some later issues not mentioned here, are in good agreement with independent information and with epigraphical evidence. As they are all based on the same starting point in time, this seems to give a strong support to the chronology as a whole.

3 Peculiarities and doubts

In the above reasoning it was tacitly assumed that all the dated cistophori of Ephesos use the same dating system (era). At first sight, this seems to be a fairly obvious hypothesis, but a closer look leads to some doubts. It was mentioned before that several year numbers before 67 are missing in the present record, among them being one interval of two and one of three years. On the other hand, there is a long gap of 8 years between the end of the first group of cistophori listed by Kleiner and the beginning of the second group, with the names of the Roman magistrates. The usual explanation is a closure of the mint. More important, there is the fact that the Roman province Asia was not set up in 134 or 133 BC, as one might infer from the era, but rather in 129 BC.² After the death of Attalos III in 134/33 BC, with the unexpected bequest of his kingdom to Rome, the immediate reaction of Aristonikos, probably an illegitimate son of the previous king Eumenes II, was to claim the throne. After his self-proclamation as king Eumenes III he organized a successful revolt. His war against the Roman army lasted for some four years, at first with considerable military success. Only after the capture of Aristonikos in 130 and his murder in Rome in 129 BC was the province of Asia organized. This makes it unlikely that Ephesos started its regular dating of the cistophori as early as 134/33 BC.

We are thus led to the curious situation that, while the dating of the late (proconsular) coins is almost certainly correct, use of the same era is seemingly inconsistent with the historical events at its very beginning.

This difficulty has occasionally been noted before, in particular by K.J. Rigsby.³ This author concluded that «there was never such a thing as an era of the province of Asia». Instead, he assumed the existence of a civic «era of liberty», still starting in 134/33 BC and presumably granted to Ephesos by Attalos III. Unfortunately, no epigraphical evidence in favour of this hypothesis has survived. In any case, the sequence of events would then have been very tight. Attalos apparently died in the spring of 133 BC, but the extant coins of year 1, which ended in September (autumn equinox), show no sign of an abbreviated year length, as had already been noted by Rigsby. However, it should be stressed that the time available in the year 134/33 BC would have been too short for any major change, whatever this might have been. Hence, one should look for another way out of the difficulty.

The situation changes markedly if we assume that the honour was granted by Rome. It would then also be easier to understand why it was restricted to Ephesos, considering the decisive part this city played in the sea battle off the coast of Kyme. Obviously, the distinction could have been made only after the victory over Aristonikos. Thus, even neglecting transmission times or political and administrative delays, 130 BC is then clearly a *terminus post quem* for the actual beginning of an «Ephesian era». This date, however, if applied to the series as a whole, would lead to serious problems for the second group.

² For a concise review of the historical surroundings see e.g. C. Vial, *Les Grecs, de la paix d'Apamée à la bataille d'Actium* (Paris 1995).

³ K.J. Rigsby, *The Era of the Province of Asia*, *Phoenix* 33, 1979, p. 39-47.

4 Proposed solution

It looks as if our difficulties were caused by an assumption which seems obvious to everybody, but is nevertheless wrong. Let us first recall the fact that the dated cistophori quite naturally fall into two separate groups: a rather long first one (of nearly seven decades) and a short second one (of about one decade). We should also realize that, at present, the proposed absolute dates are based essentially on information assembled only from coins of the second group. This, in turn, gives us the possibility to delay the first group alone, without running into chronological problems for the second group. We therefore suggest to treat the two groups differently. In particular, we propose

- for group I: to identify year 1 with 129/28 BC,
- for group II: to identify year 76 with 59/58 BC.

For group II this corresponds to an assumed fictitious origin in 134/33 BC. In other words, the first group is now delayed by five years with respect to the traditional chronology, while the dates of the second group remain unchanged. This proposal is presented numerically in Table 2.

Table 2: Correspondences between the year numbers of the dated cistophori of Ephesos and the actual dates (Julian calendar), according to the traditional and the new chronologies.

year number	traditional date (BC)	new date (BC)
		<i>group I:</i>
1	134/33	129/28
2	133/32	128/27
3	132/31	127/26
·	·	·
·	·	·
·	·	·
66	69/68	64/63
67	68/67	63/62
(68 to 75)	-	-
		<i>group II:</i>
76	59/58	59/58
77	58/57	58/57
·	·	·
·	·	·
·	·	·
86	49/48	49/48

Obviously, we do not know why, for the second group, the Roman politicians apparently wanted to maintain the fiction that Asia had been established as a province immediately after the death of Attalos III. Perhaps it was to suppress their unfortunate experience with Aristonikos.

It follows from the available numismatic evidence that the year numbers ranging from 68 to 75 apparently were not used at Ephesos. According to the new chronology, this corresponds to a closure of the mint of three years, a period which would be even shorter if another year number (e.g. 68) was found.

5 Possible confirmations

The photographic reproductions of Ephesian cistophori available to us, essentially those given by Kleiner and - for some of the years not illustrated - from various sales catalogues, have been carefully studied in the hope that they will show marks with chronological significance, although the notorious uniformity of this coinage reduces the chance considerably. The only case of interest we have found is a coin with year number I (= 10), illustrated in Kleiner, Pl. XIII, 3, with a star symbol (*Fig. 2*). For the traditional chronology this corresponds to 125/24 BC, but in the new one to 120/19 BC. The basic idea is to look for an association with an astronomical event for which the absolute date is known.⁴ While 125 seems to have no astronomical significance, 120 BC allows for a possible interpretation. There is a Chinese observation of a comet⁵ that can now be completed by Babylonian diaries.⁶ They date the appearance to the period of May to July, 120 BC.⁷ The fact that records exist from both China and Babylonia indicates that the event was of some importance. This agrees with the suggested shift of five years for the first group.

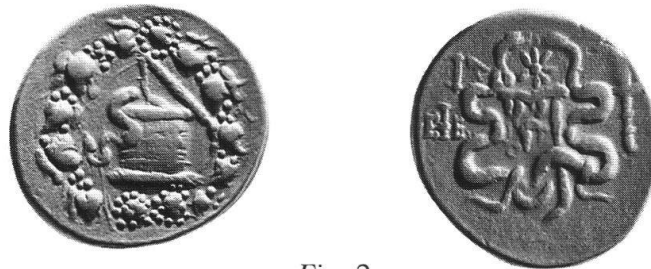


Fig. 2

⁴ For a more detailed discussion see J.W. Müller, *Some Absolute Datings of Early Cistophori* (forthcoming).

⁵ Ho Peng Yoke, *Ancient and Medieval Observations of Comets and Novae in Chinese Sources*, *Vistas in Astronomy* 5, 1962, p. 127-225.

⁶ H. Hunger, *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylonia*, Vol. III. *Oesterr. Akad. der Wiss.*, (Vienna 1996), p. 307 ff.

⁷ Ho (above, n. 5), 42.

On the other hand, there is also an astronomical confirmation that the traditional chronology is correct for the second group. On cistophori with the year number 86, i.e. 49/48 BC, which seems to be the last number recorded for Ephesos, there appears the name of the praetor C. Fannius, administrator of the province. It is of interest that his cistophori struck for Tralleis occasionally show two stars beside the serpents heads.⁸ We know from Chinese, Korean and Roman sources that in April 49 BC there was indeed a comet, with a tail of more than 15 degrees.⁹

That caution should always be exercised may be illustrated by another cistophorus of Tralleis, with the name of C. Septumius, and thus (see Table 1) dated between 57 and 55 BC. It shows a prominent star above the cap of Polydeukes (see Stumpf, Table II, 2). However, as such a representation is traditional for the Dioscuri, this has no astronomical significance. Also, for the period in question no appropriate celestial event is known.

In addition, there is an unusual numismatic document that can be interpreted as providing indirect confirmation of 129 BC as starting point. This concerns a Roman silver quinarius¹⁰ of Octavianus (*Fig. 3*), possibly struck at Ephesos,¹¹ with the inscription CAESAR IMP VII on the obverse, and on the reverse ASIA RECEPTA, together with cista mystica and snakes. J.-B. Giard dates it to August, 29 BC.¹² While the official reason for this special issue probably was to celebrate the «recovery» of the province from M. Antonius, after his defeat at Actium (31 BC) and his suicide in the following year, the timing may have been chosen to coincide with the centennial of the actual organization of the province Asia. If so, this would confirm that the future emperor was well informed on the history of international policy; it might also be a new example of a Roman «anniversary issue» (M. Grant). We leave this suggestion to the specialists; it has little weight in itself, but would nicely fit into the picture as a whole.



Fig. 3 (2:1)

⁸ See, e.g., catalogues Bank Leu 18, 1977, no. 212 and Lanz Munich 42, 1987, no. 268, with different local magistrates.

⁹ Ho (above, n. 5), 56.

¹⁰ BMC 647; RIC1 18, RIC2 276.

¹¹ or more likely in an Italian mint, as M. Amandry has kindly informed me.

¹² J.-B. Giard, *Catalogue des monnaies de l'empire romain, I. Auguste* (Paris 1976), no. 899 ff.

6 Conclusion

The dated cistophori of Ephesos are usually assumed to form a single sequence. We propose to divide them in two chronological groups, with different starting points. While the second group, characterized by the appearance of the names of Roman magistrates, keeps its traditional dating, the larger first group has to be shifted by five years, with year 1 now attributed to 129/28 BC.

A shift of five years may seem to be of little importance. However, for a coin series which is often used as a chronological reference, this is an unexpectedly large amount that cannot be neglected. It would have consequences for other coinages, in particular for the cistophori issued by other cities. Thus, for example, all the dates of the late Pergamene cistophori, which were established by their association with Ephesos, will have to be lowered if the new chronology is accepted. On the other hand, this may give the opportunity for a new confirmation. It is tempting, indeed, to associate no. 25 of Kleiner's catalogue,¹³ showing the monogram ΑΠ and a star symbol, with the year 69 BC, in which two comets appeared and possibly also a nova.¹⁴ At present the coin is dated to ca. 76 BC. This example illustrates the dangers inherent in relative datings where arguments concerning the moment of hoard burial and the striking of coins often have a tendency to become circular. As all dates seem to confirm one other, they are quoted with small uncertainties, while in fact the relationship with reality has been lost and one just «errs more precisely». Only independent absolute determinations as obtained, for example, by astronomical dating, allow us to identify errors and correct them.

I should mention that my friend François de Callataÿ, who has seen this text, does not agree with the modified dating of group I. For the reasons, see his recent book on the Mithridatic wars,¹⁵ which is based on the traditional chronology. Perhaps a new discussion among experts would result in a better understanding of the circumstances on which the «era of Ephesos» relies.

Acknowledgments

My warm thanks go to Prof. Georges Le Rider, who not only kindly accepted to read an early version of this text and encouraged me to publish it, but also made me aware of the excellent article of Rigsby. I am also grateful to Silvia Hurter for her precious editorial help, in particular with the figures. Last but not least, I wish to thank my wife Denise for her assistance in the preparation of various drafts of this article.

¹³ F.S. Kleiner, Hoard Evidence and the Late Cistophori of Pergamum, ANSMN 23, 1978, p. 77-105.

¹⁴ Ho (above, n. 5) 52 to 54.

¹⁵ F. de Callataÿ, L'histoire des guerres mithridatiques vue par les monnaies (Louvain-la-Neuve 1997), esp. p. 169-179.

Zusammenfassung

Die lange Reihe datierter Kistophoren von Ephesos, mit Jahrnummern von 1 bis 86, besteht eigentlich aus zwei Gruppen: die erste ist ohne, die zweite mit den Namen der römischen Prokuratoren. Eine Lücke von 8 Jahren liegt dazwischen. Jahr 1 wird gewöhnlich mit 134/33 v.Chr. gleichgesetzt.

Wir schlagen vor, die Chronologie der ersten Gruppe um 5 Jahre zu verschieben, während die Daten der zweiten Gruppe ungeändert bleiben. Dadurch können einige historische Schwierigkeiten behoben und die scheinbare Lücke verkleinert werden, während die Übereinstimmung mit den geschichtlichen Tatsachen erhalten bleibt. Die modifizierte Chronologie wird sowohl von astronomischen als auch von numismatischen Argumenten gestützt.

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Figure captions

- Fig. 1: Examples illustrating dated Ephesian cistophori :
a for group I, coin with year number 64. Lanz 36, 1986, 364
b for group II, coin with year number 81. Leu 7, 1973, 222
- Fig. 2: Cistophorus with year number 10 and a star symbol on the reverse.
ANSMN 18, 1982, Pl. 12, 3 (Athens)
- Fig. 3: Quinarius of Octavianus with the inscription ASIA RECEPTA on rev.
Private collection, 2:1.