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A COIN OF AGRIPPA II COMMEMORATING THE ROMAN VICTORY OVER THE JEWS

Shraga Qedar

Recently I had the opportunity to identify a coin which was wrapped in anonymity for the last eighty years. This occasion came as the result of inspecting a related specimen with a more complete inscription.¹

¹ The writer is grateful to the owner of the coin for permission to publish it here.

The description of the coin (Fig. 1, 1:1; Fig. 2, 3:1):
AE, 4,70 g, \varnothing :17/20 mm, axis: 360°.

Obv. Palm branch; inscr. right and left: BA ΑΓ(PI) - NIK • CEB; in field: ET - IE.

Rev. Inscr. in wreath: TIBE/PIAC.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



The coin was first published and illustrated in an auction catalogue in 1907² where it was attributed to the mint of Tiberias in the thirteenth year of Claudius. The cataloguer, Leo Hamburger, attempted to complete the partially illegible date, but without success.

Seven years later, in 1914, G. F. Hill published a similar coin in the British Museum Catalogue³, without referring to the first publication. The coin was listed in the BMC, without a photograph, under the coins of the city of Tiberias. As with the previous specimen, the legend and the date on the right side of the coin were partly illegible. Y. Meshorer also published the British Museum specimen, this time with an illustration⁴. Once more its incomplete inscription led to an attribution to Tiberias under the rule of Agrippa I.

Another specimen was later published by J. Maltiel-Gerstenfeld⁵. Attributed there correctly to Agrippa II, it was dated to the fifteenth year of Claudius, which is quite impossible. In addition to the three specimens published and discussed here, three more in different private collections (Fig 3, 1:1; illustrating one of them) are known to me.

² L. Hamburger, Frankfurt a. M., Münz-Auction, Sammlung Prof. Dr. Curtius etc. Griechen und Römer, Dezember 1907, Lot 589.

³ G. F. Hill, Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Palestine (London 1914) 5, No. 2.

⁴ Y. Meshorer, Ancient Jewish Coinage, Vol. II (further cited as Meshorer, AJC II): Herod the Great through Bar Cochba (New York 1982) Supplement III, Coins Minted under the Herodians, B. Under Agrippa I, 278-279, No. 4.

⁵ J. Maltiel-Gerstenfeld, New Catalogue of Ancient Jewish Coins (Tel Aviv 1987) 85, No. 154.



Fig. 3

The inscription on the reverse leaves no doubt that the mint which issued the coin was Tiberias. The inscription on the obverse, previously incomplete, reads BA AG(PI) on our specimen. This is the abbreviation of βασιλέως Ἀγρίππα, i.e. King Agrippa, a usual abbreviation on the coins of Agrippa II⁶.

The date, this time legible, is IE, that is year 15. Obviously we cannot attribute a coin dated to the fifteenth year of Agrippa to the era of Agrippa I, because the reign of this king lasted only eight years. Moreover, the assumption that the era is associated with the city of Tiberias (which was established in A.D. 19), is certainly not pertinent to the argument here. Should we accept this era, the year 15 would fall in A.D. 34, when a king named Agrippa had yet to appear in history.

The inscription NIK•CEB on the left, which appears on each of the specimens published, has caused a major problem. In previous publications, attempts were made to complete the inscription by adding (ΓΕΡΜΑ)NIK•CEB.

With the new specimen it becomes obvious that the inscription on the left side is not part of a longer legend but should be read on its own. We suggest NIK•CEB, the abbreviation of VICTORIA AVGVSTI in Greek. In Latin, VIC.AVG., came to be used on the coins of Vespasian and Titus in A.D. 70-72⁷. The coins of Vitellius struck in the autumn of A.D. 69 with Victory affixing a shield to a palm-tree are an early reference to Vespasian's successes in the Judaean campaign⁸; they, too, bear the inscription VICTORIA AVGVSTI.

Agrippa II had two different eras. The first began in A.D. 56, the second in A.D. 61⁹. His coins corresponding to the latter era bear portraits and legends of the Flavian dynasty. If we accept that the king Agrippa mentioned on the coin is Agrippa II and that the date on our specimen is in accordance with one of his eras, we have to attribute the date to the era of 56 rather than to the era of 61, and to suggest that the coin was issued in A.D. 70/71, without any relation to the Flavian dynasty. Furthermore, it is most probable that the era of Agrippa II was counted from autumn to autumn, as was the case with his father¹⁰, and since coins were usually struck at the beginning of the year, we can assign an even more exact date to the minting of this coin: the months of September-October of A.D. 70.

Having established that the coin under discussion was issued in autumn A.D. 70, we can draw the conclusion that it commemorated the Roman victory over the Jews.

⁶ Meshorer, AJC II, 258, No. 52.

⁷ H. Mattingly - A. E. Sydenham, RIC, Vol. II (London 1926) 19, No. 41; 20, No. 51; 34, No. 157; 50, No. 300.

⁸ C.H.V. Sutherland, RIC, Vol. I (revised edition, London 1984) 274-277, Nos. 123, 142, 143, 169.

⁹ H. Seyrig, Monnaies hellénistiques, XIII. Sur quelques ères Syriennes, 2. Les ères d'Agrippa II, RN 1964, 55-65.

¹⁰ For the beginning of the year of Agrippa I see: A. Stein, Some Notes on the Chronology of the Coins of Agrippa I, Israel Numismatic Journal 5, 1981, 22-26.

Josephus¹¹ in his description of what took place towards the end of the war, relates that the Roman legions conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple in August of the year A. D. 70. In fact, with the destruction of the Temple the siege of Jerusalem ended and the celebrations for the triumph began. Josephus also mentions Agrippa's behaviour. According to him, Agrippa II had at first attempted to prevent the war, but later cooperated with the Romans. Not only did his troops side with the Romans against his own people during the war, but, as is evident from this coin, at the end of the war he celebrated the Roman victory¹². Hence the coin supports and confirms the description of Josephus of how Agrippa II participated in the celebration of the Roman victory.

It is widely believed that the palm-branch, which is considered to be a unique design of Tiberias, came into use as a «neutral-Jewish» type under Herodes Antipas in A. D. 19/20, the year Tiberias was founded. It could be, however, that this type was copied from a similar type dated A. D. 17¹³, issued by the Roman procurator Valerius Gratus. The first series of Herodes Antipas was struck shortly after the founding of the city; it shows a reed/wreath. Later, this type was changed to a palm-branch/wreath. Such coins were struck by Herodes Antipas in four denominations in the years A. D. 28/29, 29/30, 32/33 and 38/39¹⁴.

The last issue of this type is our coin of Agrippa II, struck fifty years after the wreath type was first minted. Although this new coin fits nicely with the coinage preceding it, it is certainly not a normal type for Agrippa II. Nevertheless, it is perfectly harmonious with the atmosphere and events of the period, as we known from surviving historical sources.

The first coins of Agrippa II are bronzes with the portrait of Nero which are possibly struck at Neronias (Paneas) on the occasion of the founding of the city. There is a disagreement among scholars as to their date, so that it is just as well to assume that they are undated¹⁵. The next series was also minted in Paneas. It includes two small coins, bearing a double dating: «year six which is year 11»¹⁶. Oddly enough, neither the name of the emperor nor his portrait appear on either coin which were both struck in A. D. 66, at the outbreak of the Jewish war!

Our new coin went into circulation at the end of the war, four years after the series with the double dating. It is noteworthy that except for this coin and the Sheqel of year five (struck in the spring of A. D. 70)¹⁷, no coins were issued in A. D. 70 anywhere in Greater Syria. The coinage of Agrippa II started again in A. D. 74¹⁸, from then on dedicated to the Flavian dynasty.

With the exception of Agrippa II, none of the authorities who could have issued coins in the area were apparently in a rush to commemorate at the time the victory of the Romans. This fact makes the coin under discussion even more significant, both from the numismatic and the historic points of view. It confirms the writings of Josephus, the most important historical source for the period, and it is a shining example of the value of coins for the understanding of a political situation and as devices for propaganda.

¹¹ Josephus, War, VI, 254-266.

¹² Josephus, War, VII, 23-24.

¹³ Meshorer, AJC II, 282, No. 17.

¹⁴ Meshorer, AJC II, 242-243, No. A19.

¹⁵ A. Stein, The Undated Coins of Agrippa II under Nero, Israel Numismatic Journal 8, 1984-85, 9-11.

¹⁶ Meshorer, AJC II, 250, Nos. 5, 6.

¹⁷ Meshorer, AJC II, 263, No. 31.

¹⁸ Meshorer, AJC II, 251, Nos. 7-11.