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Alla Kushnir

Late Hellenistic coins of Gaza and the date of the Hasmonean conquest of the city

The date of the Hasmonean conquest of Gaza has not yet been firmly established. The account in Josephus, our main literary source for the event, contains only vague and somewhat contradictory indications as to its chronology. Josephus narrates that shortly after coming to power (104/3 BC) the Hasmonean ruler Alexander Jannaeus attacked the coastal city of Ptolemais. The inhabitants of Ptolemais turned for help to Ptolemy IX Lathyrus, then the ruler of Cyprus; some coastal cities also harrassed by Jannaeus, among them Gaza, promised their support. The intervention by Ptolemy IX resulted in a full scale war against Jannaeus, in which the ruler of Cyprus seems to have had the upper hand. However, Cleopatra III and Ptolemy X – the mother and the younger brother of Lathyrus who a few years before drove him from Alexandria – invaded the region and forced Ptolemy IX to retreat. After spending a winter in Gaza, Lathyrus returned to Cyprus. Josephus says that upon the termination of this war, Jannaeus marched against some strongholds in Transjordan and afterwards turned against the cities of the coast. He mentions the capture of Raphia and Anthedon, situated south and north of Gaza, respectively. Afterwards, he describes the lengthy siege and capture of Gaza itself.[1]

A few remarks within this account have been considered of having chronological value. According to one passage, when Jannaeus saw that «Ptolemy had withdrawn from Gaza to Cyprus and his mother Cleopatra to Egypt, in his anger with the Gazaeans for having summoned Ptolemy to help them, he besieged their city and plundered their territory».[2] Slightly later Josephus says, that during the initial stages of the siege of Gaza the Jews believed, that Ptolemy was still in this city. These remarks seem to imply that Jannaeus' attack on Gaza closely followed the evacuation of the city by Ptolemy IX. Since this evacuation is commonly assumed to have taken place in 102 BC, the beginning of the siege is placed by some scholars as early as this year, with the conquest accordingly assigned to 101 BC.[3] This calculation does not take into account another piece of information provided by Josephus, namely that before attacking Gaza, Jannaeus conducted operations in Transjordan and against other cities on the coast. The siege of Gadara in Transjordan is said to have lasted ten months.[4] Allowing for about a year (102/1 BC) for the war in this region, and a further year (101/100) for the initial operations in the southern part of the coast, one arrives at 100 BC as the *terminus ab quo* for the beginning of Jannaeus' siege of Gaza and at 99 BC as an approximate date for the capture of the city.[5] Yet another remark by Josephus implies an even later date. Immediately after the description of the city's fall he says : «About this time Antiochus, surnamed Grypus, met death as the victim of a plot».[6] Since the death of Antiochus VIII Grypus is thought to have occurred in 96 BC,[7] this date has been also considered possible for the capture of Gaza.[8] A compromise suggestion of c. 98 BC has been made as well.[9]

1 Josephus, Antiquitates Judaicae (AJ) XIII 12.2-13.3 <324–364>.
2 The translation is by R. Marcus (Loeb Classical Library).
3 B. Bar-Kochva, Pseudo-Hecataeus «On the Jews». Legitimizing the Jewish Diaspora, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1996, pp. 293–294.
4 AJ XIII 13.3 <356>. «Gadara» of Josephus' account was most likely a town in Peraea, not in the Decapolis: E.M. Smallwood, Gabinius' Organisation of Palestine, Journal of Jewish Studies 18, 1967, pp. 89–92.
5 A. Kasher, Jews and Hellenistic Cities in Eretz-Israel, Tubingen 1990, p. 145; G. Fuks, On the Reliability of a Reference in Josephus, in: Joseph ben Matthias: Historian of Eretz-Israel in the Hellenistic and Roman Period (U. Rappaport, ed.), Jerusalem 1982, pp. 134–136 (Hebrew).
6 AJ XIII 13.4 <365>.
7 An earlier date, 98 or 97 BC, has been suggested by A. Houghton: The Royal Seleucid Mint of Seleucia on the Calycadnus, in: Kraay-Mørkholm Essays (G. le Rider et al., eds.), Louvain-la-Neuve 1989, pp. 97–98.
8 M. Stern, Judaea and her Neighbors in the Days of Alexander Jannaeus, The Jerusalem Cathedra 1, 1981, p. 40 and note 88.
9 RE 13, 1910, s.v. Gaza (Benzinger), col. 883.

A few Hellenistic coins of Gaza which recently came to light provide a firm *terminus ab quo* for Jannaeus' conquest of the city. This *terminus* appears to be even lower than the latest proposed date of 96 BC. The description of the coins is as follows:[10]

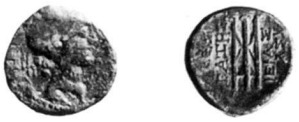
1. AE; 18–19 mm; 6.77 gm, ↖

Obv. Laurate head of Zeus r.; border of dots.
Rev. Female figure, wearing kalathos and long chiton, standing l.; holding in r. phiale, in l. cornucopiae; from l. below along the border ΔΗΜ ΟΥ ΓΑΖΑ (the remainder of the legend is off flan); across the field ΙΕΡ ΑΣΥ (the last letter has the form of V and is superimposed over the preceding *sigma*); in lower l. field ϟ; in lower r. field ΛΕΣ.
108/7 BC; Collection of Arnold Spaer, Jerusalem.

Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum. The collection of the American Numismatic Society. Part 6: Palestine – South Arabia (Y. Meshorer), New York 1981, no. 907; D.C. Baramki, The Coin Collection of the American University of Beirut Museum. Palestine and Phoenicia, Beirut 1974, p. 59 no. 1 (no photograph).

2. AE; 15 mm, 3.29 gm, ↑

Obv. Female head r.; behind the head ϟ; border of dots.
Rev. Tripod; on the l. and r. legend in four vertical lines: ΛΕΣ | ΓΑΖΗΣ (l.); ΙΕΡΑΣ | ΑΣΥ (r.).
108/7 BC; Collection of Hebrew University, inv. no. 5493. Unpublished.



3. AE; 17 mm, 7.02 gm, ↑

Obv. Laurate head of Zeus r.; border of dots.
Rev. Female figure, wearing kalathos and long chiton, standing l.; holding in r. phiale, in l. cornucopiae; around, from l. below ΔΗΜΟΥ ΓΑΖΑΙΩΝ; across the field ΙΕΡ ΑΣΥ (the last letter has the form of V and is superimposed over the preceding sigma); in lower l. field ϟ; in lower r. field ΛΙΔ; border of dots.
95/4 BC or later; Collection of Arnold Spaer, Jerusalem. Unpublished.

Nos. 1 and 2 bear the same date, year 205, which undoubtedly refers to the era of the Seleucids (312 BC). This is equivalent to 108/7 BC. The specimen of coin no. 1 illustrated here is in better condition than those published previously, and leaves no doubt about the reading of the date. The smaller coin with the same date (no. 2) would constitute the second denomination of the series.

Given their similarity, coins no. 1 and no. 3 cannot be far separated in time. Since no. 1 belongs to 108/7 BC, coin no. 3 must have belonged to the Late Hellenistic period as well. The date on coin no. 3 is «year 14». This coin seems to be unique but it is not the only Hellenistic issue of Gaza dated by a system other than the Seleucid. There exist several specimens of the coin with the same types on both the reverse and the obverse, dated ΛΙΓ (year 13).[11] The existence of the coin dated «year 14» thus further confirms that the issue of «year 13» is not an aberration, and that some time at the end of the second century BC Gaza inaugurated its own city era. All known instances of the introduction of a new city era in

10 I am grateful to Arnold Spaer, Jerusalem, for his permission to publish the coins from his collection. My thanks are due also to Professor Dan Barag for his permission to publish the coin from the collection of the Hebrew University. The photographs are by Ze'ev Radovan.

11 A. Kushnir-Stein, Gaza coinage dated LIC – a reappraisal, Swiss Numismatic Revue 74, 1995, pp. 49–51, Plate 2:1A-B.

the closing decades of Seleucid rule involved the grant of autonomy; therefore, the new era of Gaza is most likely to have been adopted for the same reason.[12]

Since Gaza still minted coins with a Seleucid date in 108/7 BC, the change which led to the inauguration of the new era could have occurred in this year at the earliest. Counting from the era of 108 BC, the year 13 would fall in 96/5 BC and the year 14 in 95/4 BC. Thus even if Jannaeus conquered the city at the earliest possible moment, i.e. in the year 14 of its autonomy, this could not have taken place before 95/4 BC.

The establishment of the year 95/4 as the *terminus ab quo* for the capture of Gaza has some historical repercussions. The account of Josephus in AJ XIII 13.3 <356–358> makes an explicit connection, both causal and chronological, between the termination of the war against Lathyrus and Jannaeus' campaigns in Transjordan and on the coast. However, as the coins of Gaza show, the beginning of the war in the coastal region dates to the mid-90s BC at the earliest; this would suggest a separate development rather than a direct consequence of the hostilities of 103/2 BC. It is possible that the timing of this campaign had to do with the situation within the Seleucid kingdom. By 95/4 both Antiochus VIII and Antiochus IX were dead and their children were fighting among themselves. This was thus an opportune time to attack the last isolated Seleucid enclave on the coast. It is worthy of notice that the timing of the next wave of Jannaeus' conquests (in the area of the Decapolis and the Golan) also appears to have been influenced by the situation in Syria. It started c. 83 BC, after the death of the last Seleucid ruler of Damascus, Antiochus XII, and with the invasion of Syria by Tigranes.

The date of Jannaeus' capture of Gaza also bears on the Nabataean chronology. Josephus relates that during the siege Gazaeans expected Aretas, the king of the Arabs, to come to their assistance.[13] The king in question must have been Aretas II of Nabataea, who is usually held to have died c. 96 BC.[14] If the information by Josephus is correct, Aretas II must still have been alive in 95/4 BC.

In AJ XIV 1.3 <10> Josephus says that Herod's grandfather called Antipas had been appointed governor of Idumaea by Jannaeus, and while serving as such «he made friends of the neighbouring Arabs and Gazaeans and Ascalonites». Since the mention of the Gazaeans seems to contradict the notion of Jannaeus' capture of Gaza at the very outset of his rule, the passage has been considered misleading.[15] However, if Jannaeus captured the city in the tenth year of his reign or even later, the possibility that the information about Antipas is correct cannot be entirely excluded.

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12 *Ibid*, pp. 51–52.
13 AJ XIII 13.3 <360>.
14 R. Dussaud, La pénétration des Arabes en Syrie avant l'Islam, Paris 1955, p. 54, followed by others.
15 Fuks (note 5), pp. 136–137.