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A New Dated Bronze Issue of Gabala Masquerading as a Late Seleucid Issue

The proper attribution of an apparently unique bronze coin formerly in the collection of Arthur Houghton (CSE 883) and now belonging to Arnold Spaer (SNG Spaer 2676) has been elusive for well over two decades, despite the best attempts to locate it within the Seleucid series.



Obv.: Draped radiate bust r., dotted border.

Rev.: Prow of galley l.; in l. field, ♄; above l., Δ 9P; above r., ⲛ ⲛⲓⲣ; in r. field, Δ I.

AE ↑ 2.76g

In the absence of a legend naming a king, as one normally finds on Seleucid coinage of all denominations and metals with few exceptions, the identification of this coin as a Seleucid issue is primarily based on the assumptions that the radiate bust is intended to represent a Seleucid king and that the date Δ 9P (year 194) is based on the Seleucid Era and therefore equivalent to 119/18 BC. Such a date would make the rival kings Antiochus VIII and Antiochus IX the only potential candidates as the issuing authority. However, the latter is ruled out by the use of the radiate crown on the obverse. Of the two warring half-brothers, only Antiochus VIII was often depicted on his bronze coinage with a radiate crown (fig. 1). Antiochus IX usually seems to have preferred a plain royal diadem¹.



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

Close inspection of the obverse bust raises several doubts about its identification as a portrait of Antiochus VIII. While the facial features and hairstyle might be passable for those of the Seleucid king, the former are idealized, while the latter is hardly an exact match. Illustrative of the idealized and seemingly non-specific nature of the portrait is the fact that George Macdonald was able to identify a coin with the same types (fig. 2), but dated ⅈΠP (year 189), the equivalent of 124/3 BC according to the Seleucid Era, as an issue of the Seleucid usurper Alexander II Zabinas at the mint of Aradus, in part based on the portrait (fig. 3)². Houghton later argued that the date would better suit an issue of Antiochus VIII³.

- 1 He only appears wearing a radiate crown on bronze issues of the Syrian (?) Uncertain Mint 121. See A. HOUGHTON, C. LORBER, and O. HOOVER, *Seleucid Coins, A Comprehensive Catalogue. Part 2: Seleucus IV through Antiochus XIII*, nos. 2367-2377 (forthcoming).
- 2 G. MACDONALD, *Seltene und unedierte Seleukidenmünzen*, *ZfN* 29, 1912, p. 101.
- 3 CSE 883.

More troubling than the basic portraiture is the drapery, an iconographic feature usually reserved only for diademed royal portraits at Phoenician mints under the Seleucids. Radiate coin portraits of Seleucid kings are rarely full busts and almost always lack drapery. The radiate crown is also peculiar in that it lacks the waving or hanging diadem tie ends that normally appear on authentic royal portraits. Furthermore, it is unusual in that it is composed of eight rays, while the standard Seleucid radiate crown was normally made of only six⁴.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.

Because of the several difficulties in conclusively identifying the portrait on the year 194 issues as that of Antiochus VIII, it seems much better to interpret the obverse type as a representation of the sun-god Helios. The latter regularly appeared on Hellenistic coinage draped and wearing a radiate crown lacking the diadem ends indicative of royalty.

If the radiate bust is that of Helios, rather than some earthly ruler, there is room to question the identification of the era as that of the Seleucids, counting from autumn of 312 BC. An alternative long-running dating era is that of the north Phoenician island city of Aradus, counting from autumn of 259 BC⁵. This era, which would make year 194 the equivalent of 65/4 BC, was employed not only by Aradus, but also by many of the cities of her mainland *peraea*. Indeed, modern scholarship has abandoned Macdonald's old Seleucid attribution for the year 189 issue, but retained the north Phoenician context. Henri Seyrig has shown that it must belong to the city of Gabala in the Aradian *peraea* based on the similarity of the prow reverse type to that found on bronzes that clearly name the city (fig. 4)⁶. If the issue of year 189 was struck at Gabala in year 189 of the Aradian Era (= 71/0 BC), it is inescapable that the issue of year 194 with identical types, should also be given to this city in 66/5BC, thereby adding a previously unknown year to the list of dates for this rare civic bronze series⁷.

Photographic credits

Fig. 1: Antiochus VIII Grypus, Antioch mint. ANS New York, inv. 1944.100.76814.

Fig. 2: Alexander II Zabinas, Antioch mint. ANS New York, inv. 1992.54.2071.

Fig. 3: Gabala. ANS, New York, inv. 1944.100.66219.

Fig. 4: Gabala. ANS New York, inv. 1944.100.66220.

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- 4 For the identification and discussion of the Seleucid radiate crown, see P. IOSSIF and C. LORBER, *Celestial Iconography on the Eastern Coinage of Antiochus IV*, in: *Networks in the Greek World* (Oxford-Rethymnon 2007, forthcoming) and P. IOSSIF, *La couronne radiée sur les monnaies séleucides: remarques typologiques et répartition géographique*, SNR (forthcoming). The sole exception to the six-ray formation appears to be the crown worn by Demetrius III on bronze issues of Damascus.
- 5 For the most recent discussion of the reckoning of the Aradian Era, see F. DUYRAT, *Arados hellénistique* (Beyrouth 2005), pp. 227–229.
- 6 H. SEYRIG, *Monnaies hellénistiques XII. Questions Aradiennes. I. Gabala*, RN 6/6, 1964, p. 19; F. DUYRAT, *Les ateliers monétaires de Phénicie du Nord à l'époque hellénistique*, in: C. AUGÉ/F. DUYRAT (eds.), *Les monnayages syriens* (Beyrouth 2002), p. 41, nos. 39–40.
- 7 DUYRAT (n. 5), p. 41, only lists bronze issues with Helios/prow types for years 189 and 207.