

The Beginning of the Hasmonean Coinage

Y. MESHORER

Israel Museum, Jerusalem

A MAJOR problem in Jewish numismatics is to decide who was the first Hasmonean ruler to mint coins. Ever since it was established that Simon Maccabaeus (141–135 B.C.) did not mint the 'thick' shekels, or any other coin,¹ most scholars have been inclined to assign the first Hasmonean minting to John Hyrcanus I (135–104 B.C.).² The main question is thus whether the coins bearing the legend יהוחנן הכהן הגדול וחבר היהודים (Jehoḥanan the High Priest and the *Hever* of the Jews) were minted by John Hyrcanus I or by John Hyrcanus II (63–40 B.C.). In the early stages of research, when the Hebrew name of Hyrcanus II had not yet been established, all the coins bearing the name Jehoḥanan were attributed to Hyrcanus I.³ Kanael and Kindler, however, showed that many of the Jehoḥanan coins should be attributed to Hyrcanus II.⁴

In 1967 the present writer tried to prove that all the coins bearing the name of Jehoḥanan were struck under Hyrcanus II.⁵ Moreover, I suggested that even the coins bearing the name of Yehuda were struck under Judas Aristobulus II (67–63 B.C.) and not under Aristobulus I (104/3 B.C.) as had formerly been assumed, thus concluding that Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 B.C.) was the first Hasmonean ruler who minted coins.⁶

Most of my arguments were deductions based on the available numismatic material, but I lacked sufficient data to enable me to prove my theory definitely. Recently, the Israel Museum was presented with a tiny coin found near Jerusalem which sheds new light on this problem. The description of the coin is as follows:

AE; 12 mm; 0.7752 gr (Pl. 9:B, C);

Obv. Head of Antiochus VIII to right, radiate.

¹ For a summary of the controversy and the evidence see L. Kadman: *The Coins of the Jewish War of 66–73 C.E.* (Corpus Nummorum Palaestinensium), Jerusalem, 1960, pp. 42–71.

² E.g. A. Kindler: *The Coinage of the Hasmonaean Dynasty, The Dating and Meaning of the Ancient Jewish Coins and Symbols*, Jerusalem, 1958, pp. 10–28.

³ E.L. Sukenik: A Hoard of Coins of John Hyrcanus, *Jewish Quarterly Review* N.S. 37 (1946/7), pp. 281–282. E. Merzbacher attributed all the coins of Jehoḥanan to John Hyrcanus II (*Zeitschrift für Numismatik* 3 [1876], pp. 201 ff.). Madden and de Saulcy attributed the small bronze coins with lily and palm-branch to John Hyrcanus II, see F. Madden: *Coins of the Jews*, London, 1881, p. 96, Nos. 1, 2; De Saulcy, *Numismatic Chronicle*, N. S. 11 (1871), p. 240, Nos. 44, 45.

⁴ B. Kanael: The Greek Letters and Monograms on the Coins of Jehoḥanan the High Priest, *IEJ* 2 (1952), pp. 190–194. A. Kindler: Rare and Unpublished Hasmonaean Coins, *IEJ* 2 (1952), pp. 188–189.

⁵ Y. Meshorer: *Jewish Coins of the Second Temple Period*, Tel Aviv, 1967, pp. 41–45.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 56–59.

Rev. Lily, in field to upper left, legend: BA; In field to upper right, date: LK (year 20)

(Israel Museum coin No. 1138)

This coin has apparently not yet been described in the numismatic literature. It can be identified as a coin of Antiochus VIII by its features and style, as well as by the fact that the date shows at least 20 regnal years. The inscription BA may correspond to *B(ΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ)* A(NTIOXOY). Identical abbreviations appear on certain coins of Ascalon struck under Antiochus IV.⁷ The style of the coin shows that it is a late Seleucid issue, thus leaving Antiochus VIII the only candidate for this coin, as he alone ruled for 20 years (actually, 25 years, 121–96 B.C.). The normal dating system of the Seleucid coinage is according to the Seleucid era, beginning in 312 B.C. In one exceptional instance, however, the coins are dated according to the regnal years: these are the coins of Tryphon (142–139 B.C.) struck at Ascalon.⁸ This system of dating, however, was the regular Ptolemaic practice and it is rather odd to find it on a Seleucid coin.

The reverse of our coin depicts the lily, a well-known design on Jewish coins and a very old and important floral design in Jewish art, possibly deriving from some ornamentations in the Temple in Jerusalem. On the first Jewish coins struck in Jerusalem in the Persian period (fourth century B.C.), the lily is a very characteristic design (see Pl. 9:E). It occurs also on numerous Hasmonean coins (see Pl. 9: I, K). The coins of Antiochus VII struck in Jerusalem bear the lily design,⁹ and therefore one may assume that the coin described here, which also bears a lily, was struck in Jerusalem in the twentieth year of Antiochus VIII, i.e. 102 (or 106/5) B.C. In a letter dated 29 November, 1972, the late H. Seyrig wrote me his views on this new coin:

‘La monnaie avec BA — LK est toute nouvelle pour moi. Votre lecture de BA me semble certaine. La date, alors, ne peut être qu’une année régnale, 20. Mais quel roi a régné 20 ans? Je pense que c’est Antiochus VIII, dont la première année devait être 125/124, et la vingtième 106/105. La physionomie du droit convient très bien à ce roi. Le problème est donc un problème historique: quel était le status de Jérusalem en 106/105? Si mon explication est bonne, nous aurions là une prévue que la ville, en cette année-là, était au pouvoir du roi de Syrie, et la pièce aurait un grand intérêt historique.’

Seyrig thus agreed with this identification but suggested 125/124 B.C. as the beginning of the era on this coin, i.e. starting with the reign of Cleopatra and Antiochus VIII.

⁷ M.E. Babelon: *Les rois de Syrie* . . . , Paris, 1890, p. 75, No. 579.

⁸ P. Gardner: *A Catalogue of the Greek Coins in the British Museum, The Seleucid Kings of Syria*, London, 1878, pp. 68–69, Nos. 1, 16.

⁹ See Pl. 9: F–G. This type is known with three different dates during the years 180–183 of the Seleucid era, i.e. 131/0–129/8 B.C. *BMC*, p. 75, No. 69. M. Narkis: *Coins of Palestine II*, Jerusalem, 1938, p. 127, No. 164 (Hebrew). According to Narkis even Antiochus IX struck coins in Jerusalem, see *ibid.*, No. 165.

While Seyrig's conclusion rules out the possibility that John Hyrcanus I minted any coins (unless one ascribes some coins to the very last months of his life) it does not rule out the possibility that Judas Aristobulus I was the first Hasmonean ruler who minted coins. If one accepts the era starting in 121 B.C., however, it follows that in 102 B.C. the mint of Jerusalem still struck Seleucid coins. This would prove the theory suggested in 1967 that Hyrcanus I (135–104 B.C.) as well as Aristobulus I (104/3 B.C.) did not mint coins and that Alexander Jannaeus was the first Hasmonean who minted coins, starting after 102 B.C.¹⁰

If this conclusion is correct then one may assume that Jannaeus' first coins were those tiny and rare ones (Pl. 9:H-I) which were struck in Jerusalem toward the very end of the second century B.C. or the beginning of the first century B.C. (after the death of Antiochus VIII?). Their denomination as well as the shape of the lily are identical with the coin described here, but instead of the ruler's head, Jannaeus' coins bear his name and title together with the Jewish symbol of the palm branch.

¹⁰ M. Narkis, *op. cit.* (above, n. 9), p. 139, No. 197 d, published a silver tetradrachm of Antiochus VIII struck at Ascalon, also bearing the date LK. Narkis suggests that this date corresponds to 101/100 B.C., according to the beginning of the reign of Antiochus VIII in 121 B.C. Unfortunately, H. Seyrig passed away a short time after I received his letter, so I do not know why he preferred 125 as the era of our coin. We intend, however, to begin counting the regnal year of Antiochus VIII as 121 B.C., when he was the sole king.



A : Sherd of a large pottery vessel bearing sign of Tanit.

A SIGN OF TANIT FROM TEL 'AKKO



B-C : The new Antiochus VIII coin, Israel Museum (scale 2 : 1).



D-E : Coin of the Persian period. Obv., falcon ; rev., lily. (H. Bessin collection, Israel Museum ; scale 2:1).



F-G : Antiochus VII. Obv., anchor ; rev., lily ; date : 183=129 B.C.



H-I : Alexander Jannaeus. Obv., palm branch ; rev., lily.



J-K : Alexander Jannaeus. Obv., anchor ; rev., lily.