

The countermark on a Jewish coin in the British Museum

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Inhalt – Table des matières

L. El. Kanitz: The countermark on a Jewish coin in the British Museum, S. 25 – *Peter Kos:* Ostnorische Kleinsilbermünzen mit beidseitiger Darstellung, S. 31. – *Erich B. Cahn:* Münzfunde bei Kirchengrabungen in der Schweiz VI, S. 35. – *Erich B. Cahn:* Ein kleiner Fund im Jura, S. 42. – Berichte - Rapports, S. 44. – Ausstellungen - Expositions, S. 44. – Der Bücherstisch - Lectures, S. 44.

THE COUNTERMARK ON A JEWISH COIN IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

L. El. Kanitz

One of the outstanding and intriguing problems in numismatics is the attempt to explain generally known symbols as well as countermarks on ancient coins, causing sometimes discussions for years till, eventually, a substantiated and proof solution is forthcoming.

A Jewish coin in the British Museum – according to latest conclusive research – from the fourth year of the Jewish War against Rome, i. e. 69 A. D., bears a countermark¹ (Fig. 1); the meaning or purpose of this countermark has never been definitely settled and since a century several scholars have proposed various solutions.

F. de Saulcy, in the year 1875, thinks this countermark is the letter «mem» of the Hebrew alphabet²; F. W. Madden, in 1881, describing the obverse of this coin³ remarks: «... partially covered with the countermark of an elephant»; thus he

¹ BMC (Palestine), 187, 35.

² Mélanges de Numismatique I (1875), 333.

³ Coins of the Jews (1881), 72–73, no. 4.

supports the previous acceptance in dating the coin concerned approximately 200 years earlier, namely by assigning the coins of «Year Four» to the Seleucid period; he assumes that this countermark (elephant) seems to confirm the then existing overlordship of the Syrian king «whose special type was the elephant»; Rev. E. Rogers, in 1914⁴, accepts this explanation; and G. F. Hill, in the same year,



Fig. 1

listing this countermarked coin⁵, refers to De Saulcy's as well as to Madden's suggestion with questionmark, but is not giving own comments; J. U. Gillespie, in 1950⁶, upholds the «elephant»-countermark on the coin as «almost conclusive evidence» that the «Year Four» coins were struck in the second century B.C.

More recently, viz. in 1960, Leo Kadman⁷ rejects the until now offered explanations; however, he, too, does not come to any solution or actual suggestion; he «... had an opportunity to examine the unique coin with the countermark very carefully: it immediately became clear that whatever the countermark may represent, it is certainly not an elephant...».

So far the attempted explanations and proffered opinions.

A considerable number of countermarked coins found in certain Near-East areas are those with the countermarks of the tenth Roman legion, which was stationed prior to the Jewish-Roman War of 66–73 A.D. in North Syria and was, subsequently, the backbone of the Roman forces during this war in the siege and in the conquest of Jerusalem. After the Roman victory the legion was garrisoned in

⁴ A Handy Guide to Jewish Coins (1914), 20.

⁵ BMC 187.

⁶ The Dating of the Shekel, *The Numismatist* 63, 8, 1950, 482.

⁷ *Corpus Nummorum Palaestinensium* 3, *The Coins of the Jewish War of 66–73 C.E.* (1960), 112.

Judaea. The full name of the legion, viz. *Legio Decima Fretensis* derives its latter cognomen from Fretum Siculum⁸ (fretum = a narrow sea, Siculum = Sicily, i.e. the Strait separating Sicily from Italy⁹).

At the coast of Sicily Octavian – the later emperor Augustus – landed troops with a squadron from the Adriatic, strengthened by 130 ships from Antony¹⁰, and the legion was billeted, most probably, at Naulochus, a military naval station on the north-eastern coast between Mylae and Messina; and there it was that in 36 B.C.¹¹ during the battle between Octavian's forces, under the command of his admiral Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, and the forces of Sextus Pompeius the legion had won its laurels¹². Sextus suffered a crushing defeat¹³.



Fig. 2

Thus, Octavian became master of the Mediterranean: Naulochus had given him the Tyrrhenian, the rest was his after Actium¹⁴.

Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa was later honoured by coins bearing his portrait together with that of Augustus¹⁵ and by other coins with his portrait alone on the obverse and the image of Neptune on the reverse¹⁶; the god of the seas is here shown holding his trident in the left hand and on his extended right rests a dolphin (Fig. 2). This reverse is appropriately introduced, inasmuch as Agrippa by his naval success had signally humbled the pride of Sextus Pompeius, who had passed himself off for the son of Neptune¹⁷.

The *Legio Decima* became from now on the «Fretensis» (in memory of its share) in Octavian's victorious war against Pompeius¹⁸. Relating to this spectacular event, it is rather obvious that we find among the symbols on the countermarked coins of the tenth legion – besides the markings LXF or XF or X or the figure of a boar –

⁸ Th. Mommsen, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (1883), 69.

⁹ Today: The strait of Messina.

¹⁰ Chester G. Starr, *The Roman Imperial Navy*² (1960), 7.

¹¹ Sueton, *12 Caesares*, Augustus 9 and 16.

¹² Mommsen, l. c.

¹³ Starr, l. c.

¹⁴ Starr l. c.

¹⁵ BMC (Rome) 110 and 112.

¹⁶ BMC (Rome) 142, 161; see also BMC 285, 281 and Domitianus BMC 416, 510.

¹⁷ S. W. Stevenson, *A Dictionary of Roman Coins* (1964), 27.

¹⁸ H. M. D. Parker, *Roman Legions* (1962), 261 f.

also the insignia of a galley. Those till now well known emblems appear during the first and second century A.D. as the legion's countermarks on coins of the Roman near-eastern provinces, as at Sidon, Antiochia, Caesarea Maritima, Sebaste (Samaria) and Judaea; there is an additional, now recognized sea emblem among the countermarks of the legion: the dolphin.



Fig. 3 a



Fig. 3 b

Some time ago the writer had the opportunity to acquire what was once a bronze coin (diam. 20 mm, weight 6 g), which now on both sides appears to be rather a «blank», obverse and reverse being filed, ground and polished off, except for the outlines of an emperor's head; but there are countermarks on both sides, viz. the obverse bears a small incuse (5x3 mm) showing a laureate head and the reverse has a larger incuse countermark (10x8 mm) showing in three lines: LXF, the boar and, beneath, the dolphin (Fig. 3 a and b).

In the writer's possession is a «Judaea Capta» coin of Titus, minted at Caesarea Maritima¹⁹. The obverse of this coin bears two countermarks, one representing a head, and the other one, after thorough cleaning, turned out to be the dolphin (Fig. 4).

Some more evidence exists connecting the dolphin emblem with the Legio Decima Fretensis.

The Benedictine monastery of Abu-Gosh in Israel²⁰ stands on the ruins of a Roman fort which was guarding there, at an advantage point of a road bend, the way to and from Jerusalem. A stone slab is still there to be seen, fixed in the wall of the church bearing the inscription VEXILLATO LEG X FRE. When the writer recently visited the place and examined carefully the tablet, he found an incuse on the slab right beneath the G – downwards to left, the dolphin (Fig. 5).

¹⁹ Y. Meshorer, *Jewish Coins of the Second Temple Period* (1967), 107 and 176, pl. 31, 236.

²⁰ The «Kiryat-Ye'arim» of the Bible, where the Holy Ark rested until King David brought it to Jerusalem. I. Chronicles 13, 5 ff.



Fig. 4

On the hilltop opposite the monastery, overlooking the road, where probably once stood the Roman watch-tower, stands today the church «Notre Dame de l'Arche d'Alliance», facing Jerusalem; there, in the courtyard, is a second tablet of the legion and, incuse beneath the G, the dolphin can be found again, this time in a half-upward position to left and smaller in size.

A significant identification sign by which to recognize the dolphin is the striking *two-pronged horizontal* tail fin; the muscular breast fin serves as helm and a back fin maintains the equipoise; the snout is rather beaklike.

Comparing the dolphin shown above, countermarks and emblems, with the countermark on the above mentioned British Museum's coin, it becomes apparent that the latter also represents the dolphin, and that this coin of the fourth year of the Jewish War against Rome has been countermarked by the Legio Decima Fretensis (Fig. 6).

Key of the illustrations

- 1 Bronze, Jewish War against Rome, dated Year 4. British Museum, BMC 187, 35; enlarged 3,5 times.
- 2 Agrippa, As struck by Tiberius. On the Market, ex Sale Auctiones SA Basel 6 (1976), 444; enlarged twice.
- 3 Bronze, Private Collection; enlarged 3,5 times.
- 4 Bronze, Titus, «Judaea Capta». Private Collection; enlarged 3,5 times.
- 5 Stone, inscription of LEG X FRE. Benedictine Monastery, Abu-Gosh.
- 6 As no. 1, enlarged 5 times.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6