

Imperial wedding commemoratives

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Imperial wedding commemoratives

Of all the coins struck at the mint of Akko-Ptolemais during the Roman Imperial period, one of the most interesting, intriguing, and complex in its design is certainly Kadman 178, a unique piece of Elagabalus¹. However, a coin has recently come to light with the same reverse design as that mentioned above (very probably struck with the same die), but with an obverse in the name of Aquilia Severa, second and fourth – if not fifth or sixth – wife of the boy-priest-emperor². Having two coins to consider makes it possible to date them more precisely than when we only had a single example. It is also now possible to suggest what, in my opinion, is probably a more correct explanation for the meaning of the reverse of these coins than any other suggestion put forward so far³.



Obv. (IV)L AQVILIA – SEVERA AV; the draped bust of the empress is seen in profile to right; her hair is waved, framed by a string of pearls tied with a ribbon resting on the nape of her neck. On the top of her head, a horn-like projection that can be construed as a diadem or as flattery.

Rev. COL – PTO (the letters have serifs); the two-storey structure depicted consists of a roof with side-acroteria and no pediment, resting on two decorated architraves supported by four columns with an arch in the centre. Under the arch is a large figure of Tyche left wearing kalathos, holding rudder and cornucopia, being crowned by a small Nike standing on a column (niche 1 in the drawing). Niche 2, at the left, is occupied by Perseus standing facing, holding the head of Medusa in his right hand. Niche 3, at the right, is occupied by Athena, Perseus' patron goddess, standing left, wearing a helmet, and holding a spear in her left hand and a shield in her right. Both Perseus and Athena have their heads turned towards Tyche. All of this rests upon a lower storey containing a central arch. Niche 4, beneath the arch, is occupied by Zeus holding a thunderbolt in his right hand and extending his left over a small figure at his feet, probably meant to represent an eagle. Zeus is seen frontally, with his head turned l. The central arch is flanked by three columns on each side, which form four further small niches (num-

1 L. KADMAN, *The Coins of Akko Ptolemais, Corpus Nummorum Palaestinensium*, first series, vol. IV (Jerusalem 1961), no. 178. More than 40 years after it was published, this survey of the coins of Akko remains the most reliable source of information extant on the subject. I have used the statistics presented in this book with no alterations except those called for by the appearance of new material since.

2 H. COHEN, *Description historique des monnaies frappées sous l'empire romain communément appelées médailles impériales*, vol. 4 (Paris/London 1884), p. 319–320; S.W. STEVENSON, *A Dictionary of Roman Coins* (London 1964), p. 355–356.

3 The new coin is in private possession. AE; 27 mm; 10,4 g. Axis 12.

bered, l. to r. 5, 7, 8 and 6), each containing figures too small and schematic to be identified with certainty. The figure in niche 5, though, is almost certainly Hermes holding his pouch. This would be consistent with the presence of the other gods. At the base of the entire structure is a row of seven very small, connected arches, each containing a pellet. The continuity of the lines that form the design leaves no doubt that it is meant to represent a single undivided, solid structure, arches included.

No stairs are shown, the design is very precise, and the engraving of the die is of very good workmanship.

Kadman viewed this reverse as showing three separate buildings: a four-columned temple on top, another temple – this time with six columns – beneath, and at the bottom, a row of arches representing a quay or a bridge. For Kadman this represented a group of buildings facing the harbor of the city.

Describing the same scene, Meshorer suggested that it is a building of two stories: the Nymphaeum that is mentioned in the Mishna⁴. According to Meshorer, the row of vaults below is a schematic representation of water.

Kadman's view, that the scene shows a group of buildings along the harbour, rather than a single building, is perhaps due to the fact that such a constellation of divinities, housed in a temple as complex as this, appeared unprecedented to him. As for Meshorer's suggestion, multi-storied Roman nymphaea, with their rows of niches containing statues, are superficially similar to what we see here, but they differ in enough ways to make the identification unlikely. However, the clear evidence of what is on the coin cannot be ignored. If we suppose that the building, or buildings, depicted here did in fact exist, the question arises, what became of it/them? And why did it/they never appear on any other coin, before or after⁵? I think a reasonable explanation can be provided that accounts for all the factors.

A few pertinent reminders

Elagabalus must have been regarded with high favour by the citizens of Akko, who saw in him a benefactor. The emperor had granted them the *ius latinum*⁶. This was the highest civic dignity that a colony could receive – and Akko was, apparently, the first in the Empire to receive it. This was not merely an honorific grant, but certainly entailed economic and other advantages. The possession of this status by the city is shown by the appearance of the statue of Marsyas from the Forum in Rome, on the local coinage⁷. In addition, numismatic evidence supports the view that Akko increased in prosperity during this period. Despite the rather short reign of Elagabalus (3 years and about 9 months), Akko produced more coin types (and indeed more coins) during his reign than during that of any other Roman emperor.

Despite his depravity, or perhaps even because of it, Elagabalus was deeply involved with religion during much of his short life, albeit mostly in bizarre ways. He became sole master of the Roman Empire at the age of 13, and took his first wife Julia Paula, a married woman, at 15. He very soon repudiated her; and scan-

4 Y. MESHORER, *City-Coins of Eretz-Israel and the Decapolis in the Roman Period* (Jerusalem 1985), p. 15. Cf. also M.J. PRICE, B.L. TRELL, *Coins and their Cities, Architecture on the ancient coins of Greece, Rome, and Palestine* (London/Detroit 1977), p. 44, fig. 73, with the same interpretation.

5 In fact, Tyche often appears at Akko within a frame in the form of either a tetra- or hexastyle temple with an arched center intercolumnation, very similar to what we have here (Kadman, nos. 1, 143, 166–173, 179, etc.). But this temple is never shown with other statues between the columns.

6 B.V. HEAD, *Historia Numorum. A manual of greek numismatics*, 2nd edn. (Oxford 1911), p. lxxxv (v). KADMAN (above, n. 1), p. 24, uses this quotation but says *ius italicum*.

7 KADMAN (above, n. 1), pp. 78–79 and pl. XI, no. 163.

dalously married a Vestal Virgin, Aquilia Severa, the daughter of Quintus Aquilius, two times consul. He divorced Aquilia in her turn, very soon thereafter. He then married the much older Annia Faustina, the candidate of his wise grandmother Julia Maesa, but she too was rapidly repudiated, and then, after Annia and possibly two other ladies, he took back Aquilia Severa, in 221 CE. At this time Elagabalus was 16.

Elagabalus was killed the next year, by the same force that had brought him to power in the first place: the Legions.

What made Elagabalus so popular in Akko? Probably the same reasons that had made him the choice of the Roman Army for emperor, regardless of the Roman Senate. It seems clear that at Akko there was a relationship of «leader *vis-à-vis* grateful subjects» between Elagabalus and the former legionnaires who had settled in the city. Besides, his home city, Emesa, was – unlike Rome – almost next door to Akko.

I suggest that, upon the apparent consolidation of the imperial household with the marriage of Elagabalus and Aquilia, the emperor's loyal and grateful subjects in Akko produced a portable shrine in honour of the royal couple, the design of which, though utterly unprecedented, was nevertheless in keeping with the circumstances, which were themselves unprecedented.

There are, in fact, numerous precedents for the depiction of portable shrines upon the coins of Akko. From the time of Caracalla onward, 31 coin-types depict temples (tetra-, hexa- and octostyle) under 12 emperors; 9 shrines are shown under 6 emperors, and portable shrines, of at least 5 different types, are depicted for nine other imperial persons. It is true that the other portable shrines (Kadman nos. 149, 174, 196–197, 206–207, 220–221, 245, 256, and 268–269) are relatively small, and are often rather simple in design. They are shown on the coins to have been carried by means of four poles inserted in the base, 2 in front and 2 behind. However, in the case of the exceptional piece discussed here, there are 7 arches visible, with, presumably, another 7 arches at the back, making for a total of 14 carrying poles. This was certainly no standard portable shrine; but then neither were the circumstances.

The nature of portable shrines is to be collapsible, and easy to reassemble when needed. The figures they housed were not necessarily of colossal size. The whole ensemble could, for example, easily be packed up and shipped away as an imperial wedding present.

It would have been very natural indeed for Akko to take every opportunity to pay homage to an emperor who had shown such generosity to the city, and who might well continue to do so for many more years to come, as one would expect from such a young master.

Introducing an innovation, the mint of Akko issued, for the first time, coins showing a radiate portrait, for Elagabalus; an obvious allusion to Helios, the god to whom this emperor was so closely related. Radiate emperors had never before been shown in local coins, nor were there to be any others until Philip's time.

Three coins from Akko bear a radiate likeness of Elagabalus, all of different types and different sizes: Kadman no. 163, reverse Marsyas; Kadman no. 170, reverse Tyche within hexastyle temple; and Kadman no. 178 with the reverse discussed here⁸. Obviously, there was a reason for the creation of the new por-

⁸ Kadman gives a wrong diameter in the description of this coin.

traiture, and for the use of it in different denominations. I suggest that the three coins of Elagabalus mentioned above, with the addition of the new coin of Severa, form a series produced to commemorate the royal marriage, and the granting of imperial favours to the ex-legionnaires, citizens of Akko, which very probably occurred within a very short period of time.

Conclusions

The complex structure shown in the reverse of our coin is not a public building but a portable shrine. This would explain the one-time appearance of such an unusual structure upon a coin. The lack of stairs in the design reinforces this hypothesis.

If Severa's coin indeed belonged to the radiate series, this would provide a plausible explanation for the unusual design of what must be understood as a diadem upon her head.

Both the present coin and K 178, are clearly of better workmanship than most, if not all their peers, although they were produced by the same die-cutters. A reasonable explanation for this fact would be that they are show pieces.

Taking into account all the circumstances discussed, the most likely date for the issue of the coin of Aquilia Severa, as well as the «radiate series», would be 222 during the short period of time that her first marriage to Elagabalus lasted.

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