

Les tétradrachmes d'Orodès II et de Phraate IV [François de Callatay]

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François de Callataÿ

Les tétradrachmes d'Orodès II et de Phraate IV.

Etude du rythme de leur production monétaire à la lumière d'une grande trouvaille. *Studia Iranica* Cahier 14. Paris 1994. 96 pp., 20 pls. Card covers. ISBN 2-910640-00-0.

This slim volume presents a catalogue of 430 Parthian tetradrachms minted in Seleucia, 74 of Orodes II and 356 of Phraates IV, which appeared on the Brussels market in 1993. While superficially similar in fabric, the coins apparently come from two separate hoards as there is a gap of a minimum of 10 years between the last issue of Orodes II in the group and the first of Phraates IV. The importance of *C's* work lies primarily in his meticulous die study of the issues of Phraates IV, all of which are dated by year and month (May 28 to September 23 B.C.): his conclusions concerning how the coins were struck, and in what numbers, are well-nigh revolutionary. Of equal importance is *C's* convincing reconstruction of the ephemeral coinage of Tiridates II. All this information is found in an extensive commentary before the catalogue, and is well worth summarizing.

Iconography. Obverses. The so-called royal wart found on the king's forehead, often used by modern commentators as evidence for Arsacid dynastic connections, seems to have no such significance. The beard length is a purely subjective criterion: as *C* says, «à partir de quel moment une barbe cesse-t-elle d'être «mi-longue» pour devenir «courte»?» The torcs worn by the king can have differing numbers of spirals, and can have either plain or animal protome terminals (*C* later makes a good case for issues of Phraates IV with griffin protome torc terminals as having probably been struck in Seleucia, but in a secondary workshop with its own personnel).

Contrary to all previous commentators, *C* identifies the royal bust as wearing an ornamented cuirass rather than a highly elaborate robe. In this he's quite wrong: Parthian figural sculpture commonly portrays royal personages as wearing luxuriously decorated robes (as the famous 3rd cent. A.D. statues from Hatra of Kings Utalu and Sanatruq),¹ and on the coins the king has a vee-shaped neckline, seldom found on a cuirass, but exactly like the 1st cent. B.C. – 1st cent. A.D. [?] life-sized bronze statue of a robed Parthian royal figure from Shami.² Nevertheless, *C's* observations on the robe's ornamentation are fully valid, and the consistency with which specific items of the decoration are handled over time within certain issues has allowed him to suggest that the dies were produced by a single individual for a single workshop.

¹ R. Ghirshman, *Iran* (Munich 1962), figs. 100 and 105 = H. E. Mathiesen, *Sculpture in the Parthian Empire* (Aarhus 1992), 213 and 215.

² Ghirshman fig. 99 = Mathiesen 80.

One problem I have with *C*'s commentary is that it is often rather difficult, if not impossible, to see the details he discusses in the text on his plates. It would have been better had he arranged to have a plate or two of line drawings to clearly illustrate the designs in question. Additionally, he often refers to a general type by its Sellwood number³ rather than those of his catalogue: to find the illustration of Sellwood 48.4 (with the letter *beta* on the obverse, *C* p. 13) one has to turn to the catalogue section to determine the actual inventory numbers so that the coins can be located on *C*'s plates (where the detail he speaks of is invisible anyway). This gets very irksome at times.

Reverses. The short period ranging from the 50s B.C. to the mid 20s A.D. was one of iconographic innovation for the Parthians, with a remarkable number of variant reverse types appearing on what had previously been a rather static coinage. Nine differing reverse types are found on the tetradrachms of Phraates IV (some shared with Orodes II):

1. Tyche holding cornucopiae and presenting palm to seated king;
2. King seated, holding Nike who crowns him;
3. Tyche holding spear and presenting diadem to seated king;
4. King seated holding bow;
5. Tyche holding sceptre and presenting palm to seated king;
6. Tyche holding cornucopiae and presenting diadem to seated king;
7. As 6, but seated king holds bow;
8. Athena holding spear and presenting diadem to seated king;
9. Bare-headed female figure (Tyche?) holding cornucopiae and presenting diadem to seated king.

While some of these types were issued successively, others were struck in parallel. The lack of a single plate illustrating all nine types is truly annoying.

Epigraphy and die cutting. Coins with the same reverse types show letter forms which vary from month to month and can be used to trace the activities of a single die engraver, thus allowing coins with illegible dates to be confidently attributed. By extremely careful examination of superficially very similar obverse dies *C* rejects the possibility that hubs were used in their manufacture. Equally careful observation proves that certain letters in the reverse legend were cut first and served as guide points for the layout of the remainder.

Metrology. The weights of all the coins in Brussels are given in 7 tables (there are a number of unimportant misprints in the table headings, as 5. *Phraates IV*, which should read n° 190–201 instead of 189–200, and 253–254/300–325 instead of 252–253/299–324). As one would expect, the tetradrachms of Orodes II are struck on a notably heavier standard than those of Phraates IV (a median of 15.22 g versus one of 14.85 g), and seemingly have a higher silver content as well (no analyses were done). Most peculiar, if not disturbing, is *C*'s discovery that the average weight of the hoard coins is considerably higher than that of similar coins in museums or

³ D. Sellwood, *An Introduction to the Coinage of Parthia*, 2nd edition (London 1980).

elsewhere (as part of this study *C* recorded 204 additional tetradrachms). For example, tetradrachms of Oroses II from the hoard have a median weight of 15.22 g, while those previously known average 12.92 g! Such a massive difference in weight seems not to be caused by drastic cleaning (a sample of 14 tetradrachms from the hoard were weighed before and after cleaning and only showed losses ranging from 0.48 to 0.04 g), and, in fact, *C* can offer no explanation for it at this time.

Sequence of issues. The order in which the tetradrachms of Phraates IV were struck is easily established using the month and year dates given on the coins themselves. However, some coins are more troublesome since they either omit or have illegible or partially legible year dates. *C* convincingly places all of these in their proper order either through die or typological links. *C* has also made a fascinating discovery concerning the issues dated to the month of May (ΔΑΙΣΙΟΝ) 27 (ΕΠΣ). Those marked just with the month name ΔΑΙΣΙ in the exergue are straightforward; others bear the same name but with an additional letter as a prefix: either Π, Ο, Γ or Υ. This was thought inexplicable hitherto but *C* makes a good case for these letters being the initials of the months ΠΑΝΗΜΟΝ, ΟΛΩΙΟΝ, ΓΟΡΠΙΑΙΟΝ and ΥΠΕΡΒΕΡΕΤΑΙΟΝ (June–September). He suggests no explanation for why this was done, but it seems not at all unlikely that an especially big issue was planned for May 27, and that large numbers of reverse dies were cut in advance. When such extensive strikings proved unnecessary, instead of recutting the entire month name, or discarding the dies, the mint workers merely placed the initial of the month in which the coin was actually struck in front of the name already present on the die.

C also gives a synoptic table of all the tetradrachms of Phraates IV from March 27 through September 23, ordered by date and reverse type, and providing information on the number of coins preserved, the number of dies, the type of torc worn by the king and the various peculiarities of the design of the king's robes. The progression is clear throughout, pointing to a single mint for all the tetradrachms, albeit with, in 24 B.C., a second, separate workshop.

Is the hoard a valid sample of the coinage of Phraates IV? Except for one outlier from May 28, the 356 tetradrachms of Phraates IV in this group date from March 27 to September 23. No later dated tetradrachms are known for Phraates IV, though there are earlier ones beginning in 37. While collecting material for this study, *C* recorded (from museums, private collections and sales catalogues) a further 258 tetradrachms struck over the same span of five years. Aside from four coins, one of March 25 and three of September 25, none of non-hoard coins could add any new dates or types. *C* rightly suggests that a number of dated coins known from the lists of Sellwood and the Simonettas, but not present among the 614 examples recorded here, should be discarded as misreadings. This is especially clear for those coins which bear putative dates greatly at variance with the now established sequence of reverse types.

Rate of coin production. In this section *C* presents his statistical investigations into the numbers of obverse dies produced for, primarily, the tetradrachms of Phraates IV; as well as what these numbers mean in terms of the volume of coinage produced. Many people will find his results hard to believe. He uses G. F. Carter's formulae for calculating the original number of obverse dies for a given issue, and

for the expected standard deviation,⁴ (it would have been more convenient had *C* reprinted those formulae), and arrives at the colossal figure of 631.6 ± 44.8 obverse dies for the tetradrachms struck by Phraates IV between March 27 and September 23. For purposes of comparison with other Hellenistic coinages (Bithynia, Mithradates VI of Pontus, Athens), *C* translates the tetradrachm die figure into its equivalent number of Attic drachm dies: thus *C* proposes that the <tetradrachm> coinage produced by the Parthians in five years was equal to approximately 42% of the *entire* Athenian New Style coinage (2,250 versus 5,328 notional drachm dies)! Even if highly exaggerated, and I am sure that they are, these figures show what a huge coinage Phraates IV had, and, by inference, other Parthian rulers were capable of producing. The figures of dies used per month are also of importance since they show distinct seasonal variations (as we will see, tetradrachms were almost never struck during the winter), and the yearly figures clearly indicate that certain periods of Phraates IV's reign had considerably more monetary activity than others.

One question the reader may have concerning these figures is that if the Parthians struck such immense numbers of coins, where are they now? Even if we might wish to reduce *C*'s numbers to some extent, we still must assume that Parthian issues were regularly recalled to be either overstruck for new issues, or melted down and made into new flans, perhaps at a lower silver fineness. In fact, *C*'s study makes it quite clear that the reuse of earlier issues is exactly what the Parthians normally did.

The coinage of Tiridates II. As part of *C*'s work on the coinage of Phraates IV, the coinage of the usurper Tiridates II had to be taken into account. Once the fixed order of Phraates IV's own issues was clearly established, it became obvious that the majority of coins hitherto attributed to Tiridates II (i.e., Sellwood 55.1–6, 55.10–14) could not be ascribed to him, and that they were just normal coins of Phraates IV. In fact, only Sellwood 55.7–9, tetradrachms with the epithets ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΩΡ ΦΙΛΟΡΩΜΑΙΟΥ in their legends, struck in March, April and May 26 B.C., can have been issued by Tiridates II. All objections to this new ordering of Tiridates II's coinage have been anticipated, and demolished, by *C*'s able study. Of exceptional interest is his discovery that no less than 22 tetradrachms of Phraates IV were overstruck on earlier coins, and of that number 11 were clearly on coins of Tiridates (with the likelihood that 10 others were as well). This is, of course, further evidence for the Parthian predilection for restriking out-of-date or unsuitable earlier coins (as the tetradrachms of Mithridates III, Sellwood 41, only known as undertypes of tetradrachms of Orodes II).

Earlier issues of Phraates IV. This section lists all the dated tetradrachm issues of Phraates IV struck prior to those in the hoard (37–28 B.C.) and, once again, *C* has organized them to such an extent that even partially legible examples can be placed in their correct position. As might be expected, a number of month and year dates given in earlier literature are apparently misreadings. A very useful chart of the

⁴ G. F. Carter, A Simplified Method for Calculating the Original Number of Dies from Die Link Statistics, ANSMN 28, 1983, 202.

period during which Phraates IV struck tetradrachms, 37–23 B.C., shows that they were almost never struck from October through March (except for 25 and 23 B.C.), and that in three years, 36, 35 and 30, no tetradrachms were struck at all.

Literary sources. All the ancient literary sources concerning the reigns of Phraates IV and Tiridates II, as well as the modern historians who used them for their own reconstructions of the period, are here noted. They serve as a useful adjunct to *C*'s discussion of the coinage of Tiridates II.

Summary. This section reviews the numismatic evidence derived from the hoard, and allows *C* to clearly prove that the previous studies on the coinage of the reigns of Phraates IV and Tiridates II are based on incomplete or erroneous data and must, in the main, be discarded. He also shows that both the rhythm of striking and the reverse types of Phraates IV can not be easily matched to the historical record. For example, *C* finds it hard to explain why there should have been no tetradrachms struck between September 37 and April 34 B.C., especially since 36 B.C. was the year in which M. Antony launched his ultimately disastrous invasion of Parthia. He feels that Phraates would have had to have had an extensive tetradrachm coinage to pay his own troops. However, it would be equally plausible for Phraates' soldiers to have been paid with drachms, or with tetradrachms of Orodes II remaining in the royal treasury mixed with a few new issues of 37, or even with booty taken from Antony's siege train. In fact, a tetradrachm of Phraates IV, minted in Seleucia in September 33, was overstruck on a Syrian tetradrachm of Antony and Cleopatra from 36,⁵ and this truly spectacular overstrike makes it clear that captured Roman treasure surely played a very important role in Phraates IV's issues of the later 30s (whether melted down, restruck or reused as is). As for the reasons behind the changing reverse types, it might be best to agree with *C* when he says, «...il paraît préférable de reconnaître notre ignorance», than to try to invent some elaborate schema based on unfounded suppositions.

Catalogue. The catalogue is organized chronologically, with coins bearing illegible dates placed in their appropriate position on stylistic grounds. Each entry includes its Sellwood number, its full description, a list of specimens found elsewhere (such as SNG's, Museum collections, and auction catalogues), and, finally, all the coins from the hoard arranged by die. This is followed by 18 black and white plates illustrating coins from the hoard and 2 supplementary plates showing the early issues of Phraates IV and the coinage of Tiridates II. The plates are reasonably good, but due to the difficulties of photographing uncleaned coins, many details are obscure if not invisible. Better lighting would have helped considerably, and, as mentioned above, line drawings of some important points would have helped even more.

⁵ *C* p. 50, «Septembre 33 ... A. Morgan, pl. XV, n° 4»; noted as overstruck but without mention of its undertype. The coin is now in the ANS; RPC I, p. 601 with earlier references; to which add E. T. Newell, *The Coinage of the Parthians*, in A. U. Pope, editor, *A Survey of Persian Art I* (Oxford 1938), p. 487 and pl. 142 O.

In many ways this is a minor work, but it will have a major place in the library of anyone researching the coinage of Parthia given the remarkable insights it provides on the way the mint of Seleucia functioned. The rhythm of striking, accurately dated by year and month, has serious implications for the production of other ancient coinages. Even if the statistics used by *C* to arrive at the number of dies used per year prove erroneous (that possibility must be faced, though they probably will not be wildly off), it is becoming increasingly obvious that ancient mints were capable of producing large numbers of dies/coins very rapidly. Additionally, the theory that coins were produced episodically when needed, rather than in a continuous stream, seems more and more likely. Finally, the careful way in which month and year dates were used shows that they were very carefully controlled. Unless evidence exists to the contrary, it is clear that a coin die bearing a specific date was only used during that specific period. Unused or scarcely worn dated dies remaining in the mint after the expiration of the date they bore would be recut to show the correct new date, rather being allowed to continue in use unchanged till they wore out.

While this short book may not seem to deserve such a long review, there are two justifying factors: 1) its great importance for Parthian numismatics; and 2) the need for a somewhat extensive English summary given the fact that most researchers in Parthian numismatics are more familiar with that language than with any other.

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