

# The camels of Natounia

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OLIVER D. HOOVER

THE CAMELS OF NATOUNIA\*

PLATE 12

In 1955, Henri Seyrig drew attention to two very rare series of bronze coins featuring camels when he published the contents of the Nisibis hoard<sup>1</sup>. In recent years, the number of known examples has expanded through material that has appeared on the market and in private collections. A catalogue of examples known to the author follows:

*Catalogue*

**Series 1**

*Obv.* Radiate youthful male head (Helios-Shamash?) right.

*Rev.* Rider holding short rod in extended r. hand, mounted on dromedary standing r., wreath border.

1. ↑ 20mm, 5.13g. SEYRIG, no. 13a (*Pl. 12, 1*)
2. ↑ 20mm, 5.17g. SEYRIG, no. 13b
3. ↗ 19mm, 5.44g. SEYRIG, no. 13c (*Pl. 12, 2*)
4. ↑ 20mm, 5.99g. Hunter III, p. 735, 36
5. ↑ 18mm, 4.42g. CSE 2, no. 844. Overstruck on uncertain host. (*Pl. 12, 3*)
6. ↑ 20mm, 5.78g. CSE 2, no. 845 (*Pl. 12, 4*)
7. ↑ 19mm, 3.61g. CSE 2, no. 846 (*Pl. 12, 5*)
8. ↑ 20mm, 5.32g. ACCG Benefit Auction, Aug. 17, 2008, lot 55.  
Overstruck on a probable host coin of Antiochos VIII (*Pl. 12, 6*)
9. ↑ 18mm, 6.71g. CNG 79, Sept. 17, 2008, lot 714 (*Pl. 12, 7*)

\* The author is grateful to Arthur Houghton and Daniel Wolf for providing information on the coins in their respective collections and for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper. All conclusions are the sole responsibility of the author.

ABBREVIATIONS:

CSE 2 O. HOOVER, *Coins of the Seleucid Empire in the Collection of Arthur Houghton, Part 2* (New York, 2007).

SC 2 A. HOUGHTON / C. LORBER / O. HOOVER, *Seleucid Coins, A Comprehensive Catalogue, Part 2: Seleucus IV-Antiochus XIII* (New York/Lancaster, 2008).

SEYRIG H. SEYRIG, *Trésor monétaire de Nisibe, RN 1955*, pp. 85–128.

<sup>1</sup> SEYRIG.

## Series 2

*Obv.* Radiate youthful male head (Helios-Shamash?) right.

*Rev.* Dromedary standing l., wreath border.

1. ↑ 20mm, 5.73g. SEYRIG, no. 14 (*Pl. 12, 8*)
2. ↑ 22mm, 6.26g. CSE 2, no. 847 (*Pl. 12, 9*)
3. ↑ 19mm, 5.19g. CSE 2, no. 848 (*Pl. 12, 10*)
4. ↑ 20mm, 5.53g. D. Wolf coll. Overstruck on host coin of Antiochos VIII (*Pl. 12, 11*)
5. ↗ 20mm, 6.59g. CNG 79, Sept. 17, 2008, lot 713 (*Pl. 12, 12*)

### *Mint Attribution*

Seyrig raised the possibilities of Hatra or Palmyra as the issuer of the camel coins on the basis of typology. The radiate head on the obverse was interpreted as a probable image of the Arab sun god Shamash (Shams) while the camel-rider reverse type was taken to represent Arsou, the Arab god of the evening star. Both of these deities had prominent places in the pantheons of Hatra and Palmyra, but Seyrig preferred attribution to the former rather than the latter in the belief that Palmyra was not important enough in the first century BC to have issued its own coins<sup>2</sup>. However, Hatra has also been doubted as the originating mint because it was probably “little more than a caravan stop”<sup>3</sup> in the same period. Palmyra was suggested in the catalogue of specimens from the Houghton collection purely on the basis of iconography<sup>4</sup>.

The question of mint may have been obscured by Seyrig’s segregation of two further groups of bronze coins found alongside the camel series in the Nisibis hoard. These have the following descriptions:

*Obv.* Turreted and diademed head of Tyche l. or r., wreath border.

*Rev.* ΝΑΤΟΥΝΙΣΩΝ ΤΟ ΠΡΟΣ ΤΟ ΚΑΠΡΟ or ΝΑΤΟΥΝΙΣΑΡΟΚΕΡΤΩΝ.  
Spear and filleted palm branch (*Pl. 12, 13*).

*Obv.* Diademed and bearded head (Zeus-Baalshamin?) l. or r., dotted border.

*Rev.* Turreted and diademed head of Tyche r., wreath border (*Pl. 12, 14*).

Based on its Greek ethnic, Seyrig attributed the Tyche series with spear and palm branch reverse to the city variously named Natounia on the Kapros or Natounisarocerta in the north Mesopotamian kingdom of Adiabene<sup>5</sup>. The anepigraphic bearded head and Tyche series on the other hand was tentatively given to the kingdom of Osrhoene despite the recognized close similarity of the

<sup>2</sup> SEYRIG, p. 108.

<sup>3</sup> J. SLOCUM, *Coins of Hatra*, ANSMN 22 (1977), p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> CSE 2, p. 152.

<sup>5</sup> SEYRIG, pp. 104–105, nos. 6–7.

Tyche head to that found on the Natounia issue<sup>6</sup>. Somewhat more convincingly, Georges Le Rider and J. T. Milik later associated both series and suggested that the bearded head might represent Baalshamin, the great god of Adiabene known from lapidary inscriptions<sup>7</sup>. These two series are linked, not only by the distinct image of Tyche, but by the peculiar form of wreath border in which the leaves are so thin and spindly as to look more like pine needles than the laurel most commonly used for coin borders in the Hellenistic period. As the camel coins feature this very same style of wreath border, and occurred in conjunction with the Natounia issues in the Nisibis hoard, it seems very possible that these too were struck at Natounia<sup>8</sup>.

### *Chronology*

Because of the radiate head obverse of the camel coins and the closure date for the Nisibis hoard (*c.* 32/1 BC), Seyrig dated them to the late second or early first century BC, noting that radiate royal portraits are especially popular for Seleukid and Kommagenean bronze coins of this period<sup>9</sup>. The existence of two specimens (Series 1, no. 8 and Series 2, no. 4) apparently struck over Seleukid host coins help to refine the chronology a little. Series 2, no. 4 bears the remains of the royal title ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ on the left with what appears to be traces of eagle's talons from an undertype beneath the ground line upon which the dromedary stands. This combination of features visible from the host coin indicate that it must be an issue of Antiochos VIII struck at the Antioch mint during his first or second reign at the city (121/0–113 BC or 112–111/10 BC) (*Pl. 12, 15*)<sup>10</sup>. The coins of Antiochos VIII were of the same diameter, weight, and manufacture (flans cast from an open mould) as the dromedary series and featured a radiate portrait of the king and a standing eagle. Based on this evidence, the dromedary series began production sometime after 120 BC.

The precise type of the Seleukid host for Series 1, no. 8 is unknown, but the remains of the royal name [ANT]IOX[OY] on the right show that it must have been an issue of a king named Antiochos. Since Series 2, no. 4 is struck over a coin of Antiochos VIII, it seems probable that the host for this dromedary coin is also an issue of that king, although Antiochos IX (114/3–95 BC) remains a possibility. Thirteen specimens of his Antiochene coinage were present in the Nisibis hoard<sup>11</sup>.

The fact of overstriking may possibly push the date of the camel coins down to the first century BC. Tigranes II (95–56 BC) and Artavasdes II (56–34 BC), the

<sup>6</sup> SEYRIG, pp. 105–107, nos. 8–12.

<sup>7</sup> G. LE RIDER, *Monnaies grecques acquises par le Cabinet des Médailles en 1959*, RN 1959–1960, p. 32; J. MILIK, *A propos d'un atelier monétaire d'Adiabène: Natounia*, RN 1962, p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> The interconnection of these coins was already noted in CSE 2, p. 152, but the mint was identified as Palmyra.

<sup>9</sup> SEYRIG, p. 167.

<sup>10</sup> SC 2, nos. 2300, 2307–2308.

<sup>11</sup> SEYRIG, pp. 97–98, nos. 124–136.

rulers of the neighboring kingdom of Armenia, appear to have undertaken a relatively extensive campaign of bronze overstriking (including host coins of Antiochos VIII)<sup>12</sup>. It may be that this phenomenon also extended into Adiabene in the same period. Adiabene was an Armenian possession from *c.* 83–65 BC.

It is likely that the sudden production of bronze coinage should be tied to some particular event that compelled the Natounians to issue their own money. A good possibility that would fit with the other chronological evidence is that the camel and Tyche coins of Natounia were struck in 65 BC, when Adiabene was first occupied by the forces of the Parthian king Phraates III (*c.* 70–57 BC) and then by the Roman legions under L. Afranius sent to expel them<sup>13</sup>. The numerous foreign troops in Adiabene in that year would have led to the opening of markets to cater to their needs and imposed the necessity for a local token coinage that could be used to make change for silver Parthian drachms and Roman denarii brought by the opposing armies. By this means Natounia may have been able to profit from its own occupation.

### *Conclusion*

If the camel coins have been correctly reunited here with other issues from the Nisibis hoard struck in Natounia, they provide further evidence for the economic vibrancy of the relatively obscure kingdom of Adiabene in late second and first centuries BC. The Seleukid overstrikes add further support to the view that late Seleukid bronze coinage struck in Antioch may have regularly circulated much farther to the northeast than is normally expected<sup>14</sup>.

The types also add to our sparse knowledge of the cults of Adiabene during the late Hellenistic period. It would seem that in addition to Baalshamin, who was a favoured deity in Palmyra and Hatra, the people of Natounia also worshipped Shamash and Arsu. Thus the culture of Natounia may be understood to have been an amalgam of Aramaic, Arab, and Greek elements, possibly prefiguring similar later developments at Hatra and Palmyra.

### *Abstract*

The author reattributes a rare series of anepigraphic bronze coins depicting camels to Natounia in Adiabene on the basis of association with Natounia bronzes in the Nisibis 1955 hoard and a shared style of wreath border. Two specimens apparently struck over Seleukid bronze coins of Antiochos VIII date the camel series to the first century BC. They may belong to the 60s BC, a period when Tigranes II, the neighbouring king of Armenia was also overstriking Syrian bronze coins for his own coinage and when Adiabene suffered occupation by Parthian and Roman troops.

<sup>12</sup> SC 2 vol. 2, p. 210–213.

<sup>13</sup> PLUT. Pomp. 36.2; DIO 37.5.2–5.

<sup>14</sup> SC 2, vol 2., p. 211.

*Zusammenfassung*

Der Autor weist eine seltene Serie von schriftlosen Bronzemünzen mit der Darstellung eines Dromedars nach Natounia in Adiabene, auf Grund des gemeinsamen Vorkommens mit Bronzen von Natounia im Fund von Nisibis 1955 sowie der stilistischen Ähnlichkeit des Kranzes auf den beiden Serien. Zwei Überprägungen – offensichtlich auf seleukidische Bronzen Antiochos' VIII. – datieren die Dromedar-Serie in das erste Jahrhundert v. Chr. Möglicherweise gehören sie in die 60er Jahre, als Tigranes II., König des benachbarten Armenien, ebenfalls syrische Bronzemünzen für den eigenen Geldumlauf überprägen liess und Adiabene von parthischen und römischen Truppen besetzt war.

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*Key to Plate 12*

- 1–7:* Series 1, anepigraphic camel-rider bronze coins probably struck at Natounia.
- 8–12:* Series 2, dromedary bronze coins probably struck at Natounia.
- 13:* Tyche/spear and palm branch bronze coin struck in the name of Natunia/Natounisarocerta.
- 14:* Tyche/Zeus-Baalshamin bronze coin linked to the Natounian Tyche/spear and palm branch series.
- 15:* Bronze coin of Antiochos VIII, first or second reign (121/0–113 BC or 112–111/10 BC), struck at Antioch on the Orontes.





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