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Unusual Alexandrian lion coins of Babylon

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Coin on the cover: Gupta Empire, Kumaragupta I Mahendraditya. Circa AD 413-455. A/ Dinar Tiger-Slayer type. Photo: Classical Numismatic Group, Triton XXII, lot 479.

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UNUSUAL ALEXANDRIAN LION COINS OF BABYLON

Patrick PASMANS & Jonathan OUELLET



Fig. 1 – Silver tetradrachm from Babylon under the reign of a successor of Satrap Mazaeus
© The Trustees of the British Museum (scale 200%)

Obv. Ba'al seated left (←) on seat without back; he is beardless (?) and wears *himation* over left shoulder and from waist downwards; his legs are represented parallel; r. arm rests on dotted sceptre, l. on his hip; border of dots.

Rev. Lion walking right (→), tail curling behind.

Ref. BMC *Arabia*, p. 181, pl. xx:16

AR 16.56 g – 21.6 mm – ↑→

Numismatists who study the Alexandrian coinage are familiar with the lion coins of Babylon, representing the seated Ba'al on the obverse and the lion advancing to the left on the reverse. The figure of Ba'al seems to also have been connected with Zeus, as can be seen by the stylistic similarities such as the thunderbolt and the bull's horns^[1]. It has also been suggested by some scholars that the connection between Ba'al and Zeus occurs during Alexander's campaigns and is critical for later leaders like Seleucus' control of territory^[2]. Several leading numismatists have researched this coinage, but little attention has been paid to this unique piece, where the lion faces right on the reverse, which is in the Museum collection of the British Museum^[3].

The first example of this coin type comes from Sir H. Howorth who presented the coin to the British Museum^[4]. He judged that the coin with "its unique feature that the lion is turned the reverse way" is of "very rude lumpy fabric"^[5]. At first glance, it is unusual for coins minted in Babylon to depict the god Ba'al-Tar on the obverse. It is not surprising, however, that Mazaeus, the former satrap of Cilicia and appointed satrap of Babylon by Alexander the Great (until 328 BCE), used this coin to pay the troops who had come from Cilicia^[6]. The Ba'al-Tars on the obverse and the lion on the reverse are both copied from Mazaeus' earlier coinage at Myriandrus in Cilicia^[7]. Ba'al means "Lord" or "Master", "Ba'al-Tars" Lord of Tarsus^[8].

[1] Sear 1978, p. 622–623.

[2] Ogden 2017, p. 111.

[3] Hill 1922, p. 181, no. 3, pl. xx:16, Price 1991, p. 453–479; Nicolet-Pierre 1999; Imhoof-Blumer 1895, p. 1–22, pl. 1–2.

[4] Hill 1922, p. 181.

[5] *Numismatic Chronicle* 1904, pl. 1:10.

[6] Hill 1922, p. cxli.

[7] Zahle 1990, p. 129.

[8] Rawlinson 1885, p. 102–103.

This coin was unique until a few years ago and was not studied further. This has changed, due to a number of coins that were recently discovered. It is the intent of this article to bring the six known examples into one single text to fully analyse them. The coins are pictured below at scale 200% and detailed in table 1.



Fig. 2 – AR Tetradrachm (21.5 mm – 16.78 g – $\uparrow\chi$)^[9]. Babylon mint (monogram Π)
Photo: Classical Numismatic Group, Feature Auct. 120, lot 496



Fig. 3 – AR Tetradrachm (16.85 g – $\uparrow\chi$). Bee above lion
Photo: Sovereign Rarities (Inv. CM26723)



Fig. 4 – AR Tetradrachm (16.42 g – 23 mm – $\uparrow\chi$). Π below throne | thunderbolt above lion
Photo: Roma Numismatics Ltd E Sale 76 Lot 495

^[9] Before cleaning, this coin had a weight of 16.86 g.



Fig. 5 – AR Tetradrachm (15.48 g). In right field, uncertain object and grain ear | Γ above lion
Photo: Heritage Auctions, Auction 3015 (12/IX/2011), lot 25924



Fig. 6 – AR Tetradrachm (14.32 g – 23.4 mm – ↑↓) Contemporary local imitation; struck on a cast flan; chisel mark
Photo: Heritage Auctions Europe Auct. 66 (16/XI/2020) lot 4032

It is worth mentioning that such a tetradrachm with the lion advancing to the right is also known for the mint of Susa during the Seleucid period (Kritt 1997, p. 25, pl. 31; Newell 1938, ESM 322).

TABLE 1

No.	Ba'al	Lion	Weight	Diameter	Axis	Additional features *
1	←	→	16.56 g	21.6 mm	↑→	
2	←	→	16.78 g	21.5 mm	↑↖	Monogram ☐
3	←	→	16.85 g	—	↑↗	Bee
4	←	→	16.42 g	23.0 mm	↑↖	Π thunderbolt
5	→	←	15.48 g	—	?	Γ
6	→	→	14.32 g	23.4 mm	↑↓	

* The additional features were also mentioned on the already known coinage.

Metrological aspects

Hill and Price describe these coins as tetradrachms conforming to the Euboic-Attic Standard, with a weight of 17.2 g. Due to some coins having a remarkably lighter weight, these coins are sometimes described as a double shekel of 14 g. It is possible that different coin standards were used at different times in the mint, depending on their use (payment of troops, mercenaries, trade transactions, etc.).

Conclusion

This article shows that the orientation of Ba'al on the obverse and the lion on the reverse were sometimes depicted to the right on the Alexandrian tetradrachms/staters being minted at the Babylonian mint. Newly discovered coins highlighted in this text show that both Ba'al and/or the lion were sometimes depicted facing right, showing that the initial theories – that they must be imitations due to the orientation – are wrong. The quality of the engraving also suggests that it is from the official mint at Babylon. However, despite this new information, imitations do seem to have also circulated (such as coin No. 6).

Due to the lack of additional data (e.g., name of the satrap, date) on the coinage itself and other archaeological sources, it is unclear when the mint in Babylon started minting these tetradrachms/staters. More examples of these coins will be needed in order to get a stronger understanding of how these coins were made and circulated.

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