

Hasmoneans Kingdom-an independent minting

The instability in the Seleucid courtyard characterize the reign of Antiochus VII Sidetes (138–129 BCE), cause the breakthrough in minting Jewish coins occurred with the missive of Antiochus to Simon which permitted him to mint coins. In a missive from 139 BCE addressed to Simon, high priest and Ethnarch to the Jewish nation, it was written "and I let you make your own coin, a coin in your country".

The authority to mint coins was not consummated in Simon's days but during the reign of his son and Yehohanan Hyrcanus I. In any case, the permission given by Antiochus to Simon was a monetary turning point. Hyrcanus arrived at a compromise with Antiochus Sidetes, who suited himself with the changing situation and as a result Hyrcanus received the minting authorization. Evidence to that is seen in the first coin minted in Jerusalem bearing the Jewish lily sign

According to the *Antiquities of the Jews*, Hyrcanus I and Antiochus VII collaborated in several other areas and even made a treaty. Josephus states that Yehohanan Hyrcanus was the first Jew to ever establish an army of mercenaries. He signed a treaty with Antiochus, brought him into the city and supplied his army plentifully (*Antiquities* 13.249). It must be noted that "brought him into the city" (Jerusalem) implies that Jerusalem was surrounded by walls.

This was the opportunity that Hyrcanus was waiting for, and in return for the treaty he made, he demanded the minting authority. The new coin Hyrcanus minted bears the Greek letter Alpha, the first letter of Antiochus's name. The rest of the details minted on the coin attest to an almost full political independence of the Jewish ruler in Judea Hyrcanus, amongst which are an inscription in ancient Hebrew, a pomegranate and more.

In the year 130 BCE, while Antiochus was at war with the Parthians, Hyrcanus joined him with his soldiers. "after defeating the... Parthian general, remained there (Antiochus) two days at the request of Hyrcanus the Jew, because of one holiday – *Shavuot*, a holiday that the religious law would not permit travelling". Josephus quotes Nicolaus of Damascus as a source, "Antiochus placed a victory memorial on the Locos river, after defeating the Parthian general and stayed there for two days at the request of Hyrcanus the Jew". These descriptions demonstrate that the Seleucid ruler did not exact his authority and was considerate of the religious needs of Hyrcanus. This is the most suitable and likely time that Hyrcanus I would choose to mint the coins with the Greek letter Alpha.

Thus, the joint war period of Antiochus and Hyrcanus against the Parthians was a suitable time to end the minting of the coin with the lily and anchor, common to Hyrcanus and Antiochus and a fitting time to start minting new autonomous coins by Hyrcanus. This minting is characterized by at least three types of coins bearing the letter Alpha.



1

Half a pruta coin by Hyrcanus bearing a lily, a willow and the inscription "the high priest Yehohanan head of the Hever of the Jews".



2

Hyrchanus' coin with the Greek letter Alpha above the Hebrew inscription



3

Coin of Hyrcanus without the letter Alpha above the Hebrew inscription



4

Hyrchanus with the inscription "the High Priest and of the council of the Jews" with traces of Paleo-Hebrew or Greek letters on the upper left side of the reverse coin

A vassal king does not freely engage in conquests without the intervention of the sovereign. The evidence concerning Hyrcanus's conquests attest to his standing as an independent ruler with all that implies in Judea. Antiochus's heirs did not have the power to go to war against the state of Judea and this period is characterized by constant struggles between the heirs to the Seleucid throne. This claim has support in the source of Josephus "Antiquities of the Jews": "for after the death of Antiochus, he rebelled against the Macedonians and did not supply them with anything anymore, both as a subject or a friend". Hyrcanus became an independent sovereign in the territory in his hands and completely independent of any Seleucid ruler. At the time we can see signs of independence in the coins minted of other cities. For example, Aradus minted coins in 137 BCE and 'Akko-Ptolemais began minting civic coins again in 132 BCE. Tyre has been minting coins since 125 BCE, Ascalon since 104 BCE and Gaza since 103 BCE.

Assuming the "Hever of the Jews" means all the Jews, then this framework¹, according to Hyrcanus's coins came before 125 BCE. It is additional supporting evidence that the coin bearing the letter Alpha was minted in 130 BCE, and the coin without the letter Alpha was

¹ Hever of the Jews: it may mean *politeuma* = community = group of people with a shared origin, enjoying certain political privileges by the regime, as a sort of autonomy.

minted in 128BCE, after the death of Antiochus Sidetes in 129BCE, when Hyrcanus became an independent sovereign.

Following the murder of Demetrius II, Alexander II Zebina (127–122 BCE) rose to power, and his days brought contentment to Hyrcanus as well. Josephus writes "then Alexandros received the throne and made a covenant with Hyrcanus the high priest".

It must be assumed that after the death of Alexander Zebina in 122 BCE Hyrcanus continued to mint coins of the last types.

Hyrcanus I ruled 31 years, established the kingdom and expanded the borders beyond Judea. The son of Hyrcanus I, Aristobulus, adopted one of the types of coins minted by his father and minted coins with the inscription "High Priest Yehuda and Hever of the Jews". Judah was the first Hasmonean crowned as king but the royal title was not mentioned on his few coins.



5 . A coin of Judah Aristobulus

In the time of Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BCE), the minting of the independent coins continued and included in the inscriptions the title high priest on them. Later Alexander began using the title 'king' on other types. The development of minting coins and possibly the addition in coin types began during his conquests that expanded significantly the Hasmonean kingdom's borders. Alexander Jannaeus campaigned much and took over a number of provinces in Eretz-Israel that were populated by pagans. The coins he minted were adapted to the needs of the population conquered by him.

Alexander made substantial changes to minting. In addition to the types of his predecessors, he minted royal coins, including bilingual coins. The inscriptions appear in ancient Hebrew script², or Aramaic and Greek, the common languages throughout the kingdom. New types appear on the bilingual coins of Alexander Jannaeus. The inscriptions state the titles, the anchor was used on his coins as a royal sign. A small series of lead coins were minted as well, most with the inscription "of Alexander the king" in Greek. It must be noted that two bullae were discovered bearing the inscription "Yehonatan the king" and "Yehonatan the high priest Jerusalem".



6

The royal coin of king Alexander Jannaeus. The inscription in Greek "of King Alexander.



7

Alexander Jannaeus coin. An anchor type with the Greek inscription "of king Alexander". A star with the Hebrew inscription "King Yehonatan"



8

A rare coin of Jannaeus which was overstruck twice bearing the name YNTN.(Yehonathan)



9

A rare coin of Jannaeus and the inscription that have been overstruck upon cornucopia model

One type of Alexander Jannaeus bears the Lily flower and the royal anchor. This coin is especially interesting and has two main variants: one bears an overstrike on the side with the lily with the inscription "King Yehonatan". The second, more common, bearing the same types comprising of the lily flower and the royal anchor without an overstrike. The types of coins with the types mentioned here, are very like the joint coins of Antiochus VII and Hyrcanus which also include the lily and the royal anchor, that were minted in Jerusalem, as demonstrated by Hoover in 1994.



10

A royal coin by Alexander Jannaeus, on the one side the lily flower and the Hebrew inscription "king Yehonatan" and on the other side the royal anchor and the Greek inscription "of king Alexander"

We came a full circle that began in minting the "YHD" coins, comprising of the Jewish lily as a symbol of a semi autonomous minting in the Persian period. Later on, a renewed semi-autonomous minting during the Hellenistic period included the Jewish lily flower and the royal Seleucid anchor during the time of Antiochus Sidetes. The development in coins continued under Hyrcanus and culminated in the royal types in the days of Alexander Jannaeus: the coin bearing the lily flower and the royal anchor but this time minted by the Hasmonean king Yehonatan/Alexander.

With the minting of this coin, all possible minting rights were exercised by the Hasmonean rulers.

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