

The Beginning Of Hasmonean Minting

Hasmonean coins

The Jewish minting of coinage began in the Persian period and later stopped at the beginning of the Hellenistic period.

During the Hasmonean period, Hyrcanus renewed Jewish minting and this is the topic described below.

Coins Minted during the Persian and Ptolemaic Period

During the Persian period, in the fourth century BCE, in the context of the autonomy given to Jews in Judea, the Persian governance authorized the *Peḥa* of Judea to mint small silver coins at the values of obol (0.7 g), half obol and quarter obol. Coins were minted bearing on one side the Jewish lily flower and on the other side a falcon with its wings spread and the inscription "YHD" or the image of the Persian king, the sovereign ruler with a crown. The type with the lily flower will be used as a reference point compared to Hasmonean coins.

Several years ago, a type of small coin was found at Bet Zur, south of Jerusalem from the same period. Both sides of the coin carried the type of an owl and the inscription Yehohanan the priest. This inscription attests that the high priest in Jerusalem had the authority to mint small coins.

Alexander the Great conquered Israel in the year 332 BCE. Following his death and the end of his the rule of his successors (the diadochoi), local minting changed. Under Ptolemaic rule, Egypt ruled vast areas including Judea. King Ptolemy II Philadelphus (286–245 BCE) reaffirmed the permission of Judea's leaders to mint small coins of the obol denomination, similar in size to those prevalent in the Persian period carrying the inscription "YHDH". On one side of the coin appears the head of Ptolemy I, and on the other the Ptolemaic eagle. This Jewish minting ended when Ptolemy II or III introduced bronze coins that gradually replaced the small silver coins, until they went out of circulation.

In 200 BCE, after the battle of Paneion where the Ptolemaic army was defeated, Seleucid rule based in Syria began. The Seleucids ruled at the time a great empire which included most of Mesopotamia, Asia Minor and parts of India. Their kingdom consisted of many countries including Judea.

With the rise of Antiochus IV (Epiphanes), fierce struggles between bearers of the Jewish culture to bearers of the Hellenistic culture took place. In 168 BCE, Jerusalem was conquered by Antiochus IV, who took control of the holy temple in Jerusalem and robbed its treasures. Adjacent to it he erected the Akra fortress where he stationed a garrison.

Jewish Minting During the Hasmonean Period

A group of priests from Modi'in rebelled against Seleucid rule and brought about the liberation of Jerusalem. The Maccabean family of the house of Hasmonaeus became the new rulers of Judea. The sons were appointed and served as high priests and fostered connections with Rome. In 141 BCE Simon Maccabaeus conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the Akra.

Following that move which signifies a turning point in the history of Jerusalem, Judea became temporarily independent and Seleucid military presence in Jerusalem ended.

Historical Background

Yosef Ben Matityahu, alias Flavius Josephus, describes in *Antiquities of Jews* the events in the following order. Simon conquered Jaffa and Gezer which were then under the rule of the Seleucids and he was later murdered along with his family. Yehohanan Hyrcanus survived and was appointed high priest in 135 BCE. Antiochus VII came to Judea and lay siege on Jerusalem. At the time of the siege, Hyrcanus offered Antiochus a treaty due to the *sukkot* holiday. Antiochus consented and the treaty was signed. As a gesture of good faith, Antiochus presented an ox as sacrifice to the temple.

Josephus refers to the Seleucid siege stage of Jerusalem and stated in his book that "it was the moderation of Antiochus which captured the heart of Hyrcanus". Hyrcanus sent messengers to Antiochus and the latter informed him that the besieged should surrender their weapons and pay a tax for Jaffa and Gezer which were conquered by Simon.¹

In actuality, Antiochus received 300 silver talents out of the agreed 500. In addition, he received hostages from the Hyrcanus family that served as an alternative to his demand to place a garrison in Jerusalem or he may have wanted to receive them in order to settle them in fringe areas of the kingdom. Since Simon, Hyrcanus's father, destroyed the Akra fortress to the ground and banished the garrison that was stationed there, no garrison was present in the period before the siege of Antiochus or after it. This is in light of the agreement between Hyrcanus and Antiochus to entrust hostages as an alternative to a garrison.

Subsequently Antiochus stopped the siege of Jerusalem in 132 BCE, and Hyrcanus signed the favorable treaty with Antiochus. This took place in 131 BCE. It is also known that the long siege Antiochus placed upon Jerusalem ended through Roman mediation.

According to the same source, Antiochus destroyed Jerusalem's walls, perhaps partially. Josephus writes "...and destroyed the city walls completely" (*Antiquities* 13.248). However, from Josephus' description it is stated that "brought him into the city and supplied his army plentifully and friendly" (it does not state "and Antiochus entered the city" because that would imply that the city had no walls). Jerusalem did not turn into an unfortified city. It may well be that Antiochus started destroying sections of the wall in the north of the city during the siege.

According to most researchers' opinions, Antiochus VII Sidetes placed a hard and continuous siege on Jerusalem which ended in a forceful submission agreement. It is my opinion that the researchers' approach to the data brought by Josephus source is severe, as the continuous siege of Antiochus on Jerusalem demonstrated repeated flexibility and willingness towards Hyrcanus, a line that I will follow in this article.

¹ According to Josephus "Jaffa and the ports, and Gezer and Pegai and all other cities and provinces that Antiochus took (from them) during the war not under the (Roman) senate shall be returned (to them)". This indicates that (a) Antiochus took from Hyrcanus Jaffa and Gezer and Hyrcanus was required to pay later on, a tax for the control of these cities from the time of their conquering by Simon until the time of their conquering by Antiochus. (b) This conquering activity was done by Antiochus against the senate's decision (*antiquities* 13.261).

Research on the Authority Granted to Simon to Mint Coins

According to the book of Maccabees 1.13, the high priest Simon received in 143 BCE a missive from Demetrius II who sought Jewish support in the bloody disputes taking place in the Seleucid court that weakened the kingdom. The missive comprised an offer of autonomy to Judea and tax benefits. The instability in the Seleucid court continued into the reign of Antiochus VII Sidetes (138–129 BCE), and the breakthrough in minting Jewish coins occurred with the missive of Antiochus to Simon that 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.

Finally, the statement of minting right attests to a monetary and political change in Judea. But in actuality, at the same time they continued using the same standard Seleucid coins that were prevalent at the time.

In early numismatic research (i.e. 19th century), coins that carried the name Simon were attributed to Simon the Hasmonean, as evidence to this authority. Nowadays we know that these coins were minted by Simon Bar Kokhba who led the revolt against the Roman Empire in Hadrian's time (132–135 CE). It is not known why Simon Maccabaeus did not take advantage of the minting authority given to him by Antiochus. It may have been for technical reasons such as lack of resources and knowledge, or because of other reasons such as a difference of opinion between Simon and Antiochus concerning the types appearing on the coin. It is possible that Antiochus demanded that the coins bear the Seleucid king's image and other pagan symbols that were at odds with the Jewish law.

The majority of researchers view the permission granted to the high priest Simon as an exclusive permission that expired with his death. Some claim, by interpreting the written sources, that after a while, Antiochus withdrew his consent to Simon and consequently this minting authorization expired. According to the missive, Simon did not receive this authorization as a leader personally, but in his role as high priest or ethnarch, as the missive states: "King Antiochus sends greetings to Simon, the priest and ethnarch and to the Jewish nation".² The high priest and ethnarch is the authority and the Jewish nation is his intended population for the use of the coins minted. Further on in the missive a reference to the substance of the authorization appears: minting coins in Simon's country. Thus, when the high priest passes away, the next priest henceforth continues to have the authority. On the other hand, this authority does not authorize minting for other nations, for example, to the Syrians, Greeks and other foreigners that lived in Israel, only to the Jewish nation.

In order to cancel the authorization Antiochus, or any of the kings who followed him, needed to send a missive to the high priest that was ruling at that time and cancel unequivocally the minting right. According to the sources, no such document was found.

² It is possible that the Jewish nation is meant by "hever ha-yehudim" (חבר היהודים), loosely translated as 'the congregation of the Jews' which appears on the coins of Hyrcanus I.

Minting the Coin with the Lily Flower and the Anchor in Jerusalem

The coin under discussion is a bronze *pruta*. On one side appears an anchor with the Greek inscription "by king Antiochus the benefactor" and one of two dates: 181 or 182 of the Seleucid era. On the other side appears a lily.

Research concurs that it was minted in Jerusalem(see Figure 1 and 2).



Figures 1&2-Two bronze prutah coins of John Hyrcanus I with Antiochus VII, dates Year 182 of the Seleucid Era

(132/131 BCE; Hendin 1131) and Year 181 (131/130 BCE; Hendin 1131b). Photos courtesy of Amphra Coins.

Assuming that the Seleucid troops were stationed somewhere near Jerusalem, the question remains whether the Seleucids minted this coin in Antiochus's name for internal use of the troops? Most likely not. This bronze coin was mainly produced for regular use in the Jewish markets, which were under the supervision of Hyrcanus and obviously not for use by the Seleucid troops. It is more than likely that these soldiers mainly used Seleucid coins that were common and marketable in the area, and were used in the Jewish markets as well.

Thus, the likeliest solution is that the coins with the lily flower and the anchor symbols were minted by Hyrcanus I, under the sponsorship or agreement of Antiochus for Jewish use in autonomous Judea at the time.

Hyrcanus was the first of the Hasmoneans to renew the minting of Jewish coins. He was a practical and decisive leader and a good strategist. He knew how to read the political map well and plan his moves carefully. His success stemmed from working in stages, and he was well suited to changing circumstances. He used the political situation in the area to his advantage, while maneuvering his reactions in relation to the Seleucid court, which suffered from continuous struggles that weakened it. Hyrcanus succeeded on a number of occasions to motivate the Romans, who had interests in the region, and they always interfered in his favor in their interactions with Antiochus Sidetes. It seems that in the end Hyrcanus arrived at a compromise with Antiochus Sidetes, who accepted the changing situation and as a result Hyrcanus received the minting authorization. Evidence to this is seen in the first coin minted in Jerusalem bearing the Jewish lily sign.

According to the opinion of some researchers, Hyrcanus I, under the patronage of Antiochus VII Sidetes, minted this coin. On one side of the coin appears the royal Seleucid symbol, the anchor. This symbol does not provoke Jewish resentment. This is the side where the sovereign's portrait is usually found. Since the minting of the obols in Judea during the Persian period and the beginning of the Hellenistic period when Jews did not avoid depicting figures on their coins, the outlook apparently changed, and from the time of the Hasmoneans

until Philip, son of Herod who used his profile on coins, no Jewish ruler used his own image on coins.

Portraits on Jewish coins have a religious aspect pertaining to the second commandment "thou shall not worship any statue or image". However, although no Jewish coins bear the portrait of a Jewish king, the same small silver coins from the Persian and Ptolemaic periods that bear the inscription "YHD" and "YHDL", also bear the heads of Ptolemy and the Persian kings. It seems that at the time this did not affront the Jews, although minted in Judea after the leadership time of Ezra and Nehemiah, a time when the Jewish leaders were strict about following the Torah commandments.

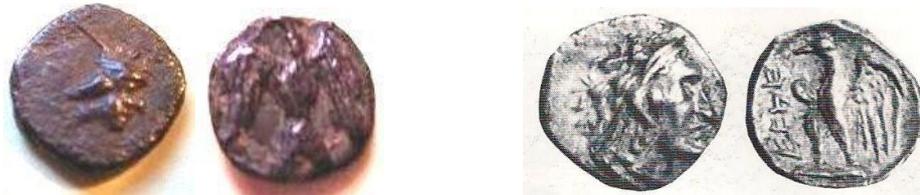


Figure 3-Profiles of kings on Jewish coins. The coin on the left (photo courtesy of the author) bears the inscription "YHD" from the Persian period. The coin on the right (photo courtesy of the author) bears the inscription "YHDA" from the Ptolemaic period.

The coin mentioned above (see Figures 1 and 2) resembles in flan shape and weight standard the other Seleucid bronze coins of that time, and was used basically as a common coin by the sovereign Antiochus and his ally Hyrcanus. To support this claim, we can find examples in Josephus that attest to the flexibility of Antiochus VII towards the Jews. We can therefore assume that he enhanced the rights given to Jews including the right to mint coins in Judea, in order to win Hyrcanus as an ally to aid him in other areas. Some examples demonstrating the flexible approach of Antiochus include the end of the siege on Jerusalem for *Sukkot* (133 BCE) and presenting sacrifices to the temple headed by the high priest Hyrcanus I, as a personal contribution.

This is the likely time and opportunity that Hyrcanus could have chosen to initiate the minting of coins, which incorporate the Jewish autonomous symbol and the royal Seleucid anchor in Jerusalem. Fortunately, the coins are dated. The coins show dates that refer to the year: 131/132 and 130/131 BCE, following the siege of Antiochus as mentioned in the source of Josephus.

The minting authorization passed on through inheritance given to the high priest who was also ethnarch, is alike in substance to the authorization given by Antiochus IV to a large number of cities, especially in Phoenicia, to mint civic bronze coins. The instability of the Seleucid kingdom gave rise to the fact that many countries and cities under its patronage used the opportunity and demanded of the Seleucids to receive a large measure of independence. This political trend was a good reason for Hyrcanus, who was aware of the trend, to mint the autonomous coins. This minting brought Hyrcanus a nice income from distributing the coins in Judea.

There are different interpretations of the meaning of the lily on the coin. The first is that it is the sign of the high priesthood, a sign that appeared correspondingly on several of the temples facilities in Jerusalem. The second is that it is the symbol of Jerusalem during the Persian and Hellenistic periods. The third is that the symbol signifies the royal house in Judea. My opinion is that the lily on this coin was used in the time of Hyrcanus as the symbol of autonomy or as a symbol of the high priesthood, to counter the other side of the coin, on which appeared the royal Seleucid anchor and the Seleucid inscription of the sovereign Antiochus.³

This method of semi autonomous minting which is characterized by one side bearing the autonomous symbol and the other the sovereign symbol, was acceptable in the Persian period. There are a number of examples on coins minted in Judea that testify to this. For example, on one side of the silver coin with the inscription "YHD", appears a falcon with his wings spread and an inscription in Aramaic as one of the autonomous symbols. On the other side is the Persian king's image with a crown as a sovereign symbol of the Persian rule (see Fig. 3), or the lily flower. In my opinion it may be that in the Persian period the combination of the falcon with the inscription "YHD" in Hebrew signifies one of the autonomous symbols in Judea alongside the lily, just as at Sidon one of the symbols is a warship and another autonomous symbol is the walls and towers of Sidon which appear on one of the coins.

Support to this claim can be found in Phoenicia, where some Sidonian coins show the same method of a combination of symbols, where on one side appears the Persian sovereign symbol, such as the image of the Persian king battling a lion, while on the other side appears the autonomous symbol of Sidon, such as a ship with oars (see Fig. 4).



Figure 4-Sidonian obol silver coin from the Persian period. On one side the Persian king fighting a lion as a sovereign symbol.

On the other side, a Sidonian war ship as a Sidonian autonomous symbol. Photo courtesy of the author.

It may well be that the use of the lily flower or the falcon with its wings spread and the inscription "YHD" in Aramaic, that appeared on the Jewish obols during the Persian period, signify a local symbol or symbols. The symbol was reused according to the same method by Antiochus VII Sidetes and as evidence to our discussion, the lily flower appears on one side of the bronze *pruta*. This coin does not bear any mention of the leader of the autonomy, the high priest Yehohanan.

³There is a coin minted by Alexander Jannaeus bearing the same symbols, the symbol of the lily flower and the symbol of the priesthood and on the other side the royal anchor adopted by the Seleucids as the royal symbol.

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.

We have come a full circle that began in minting the "YHD" coins, and also included the Jewish lily as a symbol of a semi autonomous minting during 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 I.

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