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REMARKS ON THE COINS OF PTOLEMY VI FOUND IN EGYPT

Ptolemaic bronze coins with two eagles on the reverse are usually ascribed to the emissions of Ptolemy VI Philometor, with the exception of the large denominations struck under Ptolemy II. This image is interpreted as a symbol of two rulers reigning simultaneously, either during the regency of Ptolemy VI's mother, Cleopatra I, who ruled the country jointly with her son during his minority, or during the joint reign of Ptolemy VI and his brother, Ptolemy VIII.¹ It is interesting to note that so few bronze coins are ascribed to succeeding reigns. It is possible to conjecture that the society, accustomed to using small denominations, used the coins struck

¹ J. N. Svoronos, *Ta nomismata tou kratous ton Ptolemaion*, Athens 1904–1908, pp. 280 and 292.

A. Kormann, O. Mørkholm, *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum: The Royal Collection of Coins and Medals, Danish National Museum. Egypt: The Ptolemies*, Copenhagen 1977, pl. XI, nos. 304–320.

earlier, or that the earlier motif on the reverse, even though now outdated, was taken from Ptolemy VI's coins and simply duplicated later.

Coin finds from Egypt, and especially those which have been discovered during regular excavations, can shed a certain light on this problem. However, the relatively small number of archeological projects conducted on a regular basis in Egyptian cities from the Greco-Roman period has so far provided limited material for detailed study. The poor state of preservation of the extant specimens has frequently been a hindrance in their precise identification, and has prevented the analysis of style, a factor of great importance in dating Ptolemaic coins.² The large number of coins found during Polish excavations has enabled me to make a series of observations regarding precisely this period.

From 1987 to 1995, archeological work was conducted in the area of the village of Atrib, in the eastern portion of the Nile Delta, in the vicinity of the so-called „Tell Atrib,” which is a fragment of the former ancient city of Athribis. The work, directed by Prof. Karol Mysliwiec, was concentrated around the hillock known as „Kom Sidi Youssef,” and led to uncovering part of the city from Greco-Roman times. In addition to the significant number of other kinds of artifacts – such as pottery fragments and whole vessels, lamps, terra-cottas, stamped handles, etc. – a large number of coins were found there. In the course of all these campaigns, over 1800 scattered bronze coins were discovered, mostly corroded; of these, over 900, after cleaning, could be identified as Ptolemaic. A large percentage of these last had the image, easy to discern, of two eagles standing next to

² Earlier reports from the excavations in progress that mention Ptolemaic coins limit themselves primarily to listing the number of coins and the reigning monarch, not always even indicating the metal; see B. Haed, „Coins Discovered on the Site of Naukratis”, Num. Chron. 1886; Abd el Mohsen el Kashab, *Ptolemaic and Roman Baths of Kom el Ahmar*, Cairo 1949. See also R. A. Haatvedt and E. E. Peterson, *Coins from Karanis: The University of Michigan Excavations, 1925–1935*, Ann Arbor, 1964, who in discussing the coins found in Karanis call attention to the poor state of preservation of these coins.

J. G. Milne, in „Report on Coins Found at Tebtunis in 1900”, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* XXI (1935), pp. 210–216, labels the coins with Svoronos's catalogue numbers, but, among other things, writes on p. 211, „The average state of preservation is very poor: there are not more than a dozen good specimens in the hoard.”

Cf. M. J. Price, „Coins,” in: Geoffrey Thorndike Martin, *The Sacred Animal Necropolis at North Saqqara: The Southern Dependencies of the Main Temple Complex*, London 1981; in Saqqara, Price must have been dealing with coins that were only slightly destroyed by corrosions, if he was able to distinguish even the state of wear of the specimens found.

each other on a thunderbolt, turned to the left; such coins are usually identified as having been emitted by Ptolemy VI.³ It should be pointed out here that the excavation area, apart from the mixed upper layer, allowed for the identification of distinct layers preserved in an inviolate state. After the surface layer had been removed (which contained, in addition to other artifacts, coins from the Roman Empire period, mostly mixed chronologically) a stratum of significant depth was reached, which corresponded to Late Ptolemaic times. Yet deeper, there appeared a clearly distinguished Early Ptolemaic layer. In the thick central layer very numerous double eagle coins were found, constituting over 50% of all the coins recognized as Ptolemaic. Along with them were found a certain number of specimens so ruined by corrosion that it was impossible to identify them precisely. Without a doubt, however, their collocation indicates that they were in circulation at the same time; most likely they were also of analogous type, since they are identical in size. A small number of Ptolemaic minor bronze coins, without legend, identified in catalogues as struck in the second and first centuries BC,⁴ also belong to this layer. The deeper layer contained only coins from the reigns of Ptolemy II to Ptolemy IV, though less numerous. A small number of bronze coins of Ptolemy V and Cleopatra I occurred on the transitions between these two layers.

One may venture the statement on this basis, then, that the coins found in the center layer were in circulation from the 2nd century BC to the end of the 1st century BC and the beginning of the 1st century AD.

Attention should be drawn to the fact that a larger number of coins attributable to Ptolemy VI can be seen in finds from other excavations, where they also constitute the majority of bronze coins.⁵

³ Svoronos, no. 1423–27. He distinguishes, however, a group of coins with a double-eagle reverse, no. 1694–71.1, that are marked by large barbarization of style, primarily the head of Zeus Ammon on the averse, and assigns this group to the reign of Ptolemy X. In our material, although poorly preserved, such extensive barbarization cannot be observed.

⁴ Svoronos ascribes nos. 1732–33 to Ptolemy X; on p. 339, he dates them to the years 102–101 BC. O. Mørholm, pl. XXII, nos. 664–665, dates them to the times of Ptolemy IX, but he identifies nos. 666–673 as “*Late 2nd – Early 1st century BC.*”

⁵ Among the 282 Ptolemaic coins found in Karanis (see note 2), 174 were identified either as independent emissions of Ptolemy VI, or as joint emissions of Ptolemy VI and Ptolemy VIII. This constitutes over 50%. In Tebtunis (cf. note 2) only a few bronze specimens can be dated to the reigns of other Ptolemies. In Saqqara, the predominant majority of Ptolemaic bronze coins are the types regarded as emissions of Ptolemy VI.

The sizes of the specimens found in our excavations fall generally between 23 mm and 18 mm in diameter. Only a few pieces can be set apart as being larger (ca. 30 mm in diameter) or much smaller (ca. 16 mm in diameter). With allowances for the damage caused by corrosion, they can be divided into two size groups. The first, quantitatively the largest, includes specimens with a diameter of 23–22 mm. The next is characterized by a diameter of 20–18 mm. These may represent two separate denominations. Unfortunately, due both to the damage to the coins and to the lack of appropriate conditions for weighing the individual specimens (which remained in Egypt), we are unable to support this surmise by appealing to the weight.

M. J. Price, in working with the double-eagle coins found in Saqqara,⁶ distinguished an older group, struck earlier and being longer in circulation, from a later group, less worn, hidden in the earth within a shorter span of time after being struck. The two groups differ from each other in their average weight. Price also points out the countermark with cornucopia, a thing observed on earlier coins. He interprets this fact as a sign of the devaluation of later coinage, to which older specimens were adapted as larger units, by providing them with this sign, the countermark.

In our Tell Atrib excavations, unfortunately, we are unable to make such a distinction of the state of wear – the coins were too corroded. They were certainly not countermarked, however, with a cornucopia stamp. This may mean that we are dealing here with later, devalued emissions, which is perhaps indicated by their relatively small dimensions. According to Price, this size – from 24 mm to 22 mm in diameter – would reflect a denomination equal to 1/4 the basic unit. Our second size group must have constituted a yet smaller fraction. This would be a small minor coin, reflecting the low value of the commercial transactions concluded and its small purchasing power, which accounts for its considerable dispersion and larger involvement in circulation.

This fact may also be interpreted as a symptom of inflation, the deliberate reduction of the size, and surely especially of the weight, which may occur over a longer period.⁷ As regards inflation, there is informa-

⁶ Price, p. 160; cf. also note 2.

⁷ Milne, p. 212: "These small coins may have been struck in the first instance under Philometor, and continued to be struck without variations for over a century."

tion from papyri dated to this period that prices were rising,⁸ though this problem still requires a detailed and comprehensive report.

It would appear that such a significant circulation of common low denomination coins for two entire centuries could not have been based on emissions, however numerous, from one reign. If we assume, however, that they were emitted over a longer period, we encounter doubts that are difficult to resolve. Why would such an unambiguous type of reverse as the double eagle have been accepted for a later striking? Were the common people particularly attached or accustomed to it? An answer to these questions and a clarification of the whole issue of the bronze coins of Ptolemy VI and his successors should be based on broad and well worked numismatic material, which should be provided by present and future excavations in this region, demonstrating monetary circulation in the cities of Greek Egypt.

Translated by BRUCE MAC QUEEN

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Uwagi na temat monet Ptolemeusza VI znajdujących na terenie Egiptu

Autorka omawia problem atrybucji brązowych monet ptolemejskich z wizerunkiem dwóch orłów na rewersie, łączonych z Ptolemeuszem VI. Znaleziska monet z terenu Egiptu rzucają nowe światło na to zagadnienie. Obfity materiał numizmatyczny przyniosły polskie badania wykopaliskowe w Tell Atrib (starożytne Athribis), prowadzone pod kierunkiem prof. dr. Karola Myśliwca. Omawiane monety z dwoma orłami na rewersie wystąpiły na tym stanowisku w warstwie późnoptolemejskiej. Na podstawie tej obserwacji można przyjąć, że znajdowały się one w obiegu od II w. p.n.e. aż po przełom I w. p.n.e. i I w. n.e. Średnice przebadanych monet wydają się wskazywać na istnienie dwóch odrębnych nominałów, co wymaga jednak potwierdzenia poprzez ich zważenie, niemożliwe w polowych warunkach wykopaliskowych. Brak kontramarek na monetach, znanych np. z obiektów z badań w Sakkara, wydaje się wskazywać, że są to emisje późniejsze, zdewaluowane. Potwierdza to charakter monet, niewielkich, przeznaczonych do drobnych transakcji. Prawdopodobnie obserwowany, liczny obieg monety drobnej nie mógł się opierać na emisjach jednego panowania. Hipoteza ta wymaga jednak studium opartego o szeroki materiał numizmatyczny, którego być może dostarczą obecne i przyszłe prace wykopaliskowe.

⁸ A. Gara, "Limiti strutturali dell'economia monetaria nell'Egitto tardo-tolemaico", Studi Ellenistici, Biblioteca di Studi Antichi 48, Pisa 1984, pp. 107–134.