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## Coins from Sippar

Kevin Butcher

The seven coins described below are in the collection of the British Museum, under the heading 'Coins from SIPPAR (Babylonia)'.<sup>1</sup> Four of the coins have tickets with accession numbers dated to 1953; the other three appear not to have been registered at the same time, but the accompanying tickets note that they are from Sippar and these are written in the same hand and using the same ink as those dated 1953, indicating that they are probably from the same group.<sup>2</sup>

The site of ancient Sippar (Tell Abu Habbar, on the Euphrates about sixty kilometres north of Babylon) was excavated in 1880-81 by the archaeologist Hormuzd Rassam and much of the material discovered went to the British Museum.<sup>3</sup> The seven coins come from those excavations, but there is no accompanying documentation stating where on the site they were found. Four of them were transferred to Coins and Medals from the former Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities (now the Department of the Middle East); the other three have 'supplementary numbers' (meaning that there is no further accession information). The register records the latter simply as 'from Sippar'; it is however likely that all seven were transferred from Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the same time.

The coins were listed with brief identifications in my monograph *Coinage in Roman Syria*, p. 169 (excluding the Aradus coin, which was too early in date to be relevant).<sup>4</sup> The following is a more complete description:

1. 'Aradus', AE 18 mm, 9.07g, die axis 6 o'clock. Obverse: Laureate and bearded head of male deity right. Reverse: Galley right; below, waves in

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Amelia Dowler, Curator of Greek and Roman Provincial Coins, Department of Coins and Medals, the British Museum, for her generous help in locating the relevant material and providing images, for tracking down the documentation on the coins, and for permission to publish them here. She also drew my attention to 1953 12-2-1, which is kept separately from the other coins. I would also like to thank St. John Simpson, Assistant Keeper, Department of the Middle East at the British Museum, for confirming that the coins come from Hormuzd Rassam's excavations.

<sup>2</sup> The handwriting is that of Kenneth Jenkins. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this information.

<sup>3</sup> On the excavations, see Reade 1993.

<sup>4</sup> The following abbreviations are used:

BMC = Hill G F 1910 *A Catalogue of the Greek Coins in the British Museum. Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Phoenicia*, London.

CRS = Butcher K 2004 *Coinage in Roman Syria. Northern Syria, 64 BC – AD 253*, London.

RPC = *Roman Provincial Coinage*.

SNG Copenhagen = *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum. The Royal Collection of Coins and Medals, Danish National Museum, vol. 38. Palestine – Characene*, Copenhagen, 1961.

three lines; above, Phoenician letters *mem*, *aleph*, *aleph*. Copper alloy version of BMC Series E (c. 350-332 BC).

1953 12-2-1 'Transf. from E&A (Sippar)'.

Figure 1.

2. Antioch, Claudius (AD 41-54), AE 23 mm, 11.22g, die axis 1 o'clock. Obverse: IM TI CLA CAE [...]. Laureate head right. Reverse: SC in circle within laurel wreath of eight bunches of leaves, dot at six o'clock? *CRS*: 338, no. 97 iv or 99 iv; *RPC I*, no. 4279. 1953 12-2-2 'Transf. from E&A (Sippar)'. Figure 2.
3. Antioch, Nero (AD 54-68), AE 26mm, 6.99g, die axis 11 o'clock. Obverse: [...] NER• CL[...]. Laureate head right, lituus before neck. Reverse: SC in circle within laurel wreath of eight bunches of leaves, other details unclear. *CRS*: 344, no. 125; *RPC I*, no. 4307. G 0939 'from Sippar [unreg?]'. Figure 3.
4. Antioch, Nerva (?) (AD 96-98), AE 24mm, 8.21g, die axis 12 o'clock. Obverse: Legend illegible. Laureate head right. Reverse: traces of SC in wreath, all other details unclear. *CRS*: 355, no. 187a and *RPC III*, no. 3478 for type. G 0940 'from Sippar [unreg?]'. Figure 4.
5. Antioch, Trajan (AD 98-117), AE 27 mm, 12.42g, die axis 1 o'clock. Obverse: [...] CEB ΓΕΡΜ [...]. Laureate head right. Reverse: SC within laurel wreath of eight bunches of leaves, terminating in circle; numerical letter B or E below SC. *CRS*: 356, no. 199a / 202a; *RPC III*, no. 3584 / 3587. 1953 12-2-3 'Transf. from E&A (from Sippar)'. Figure 5.
6. Cast imitative SC coin, AE 26mm, 5.96g, axis 12 o'clock. Obverse: No legend. Crude laureate head right within beaded border. Reverse: SC within single sprig of laurel in a circle, ties at the bottom; dot (?) below SC. Slocum 1977, 'Class 3'. 1953 12-2-4 'Transf. from E&A (from Sippar)'. Figure 6.
7. Uniface imitative SC coin, AE 19mm, 3.03g. Obverse: Blank. Reverse: Inverted SC, crescent above. Overstruck on a coin of Caracalla (AD 212-217) from Carrhae. G 0941 'from Sippar [unreg?]'. Figure 7.

Though small in number, this collection of finds is worthy of publication and comment. All are in a poor state of preservation typical of excavation coins, although the Aradus coin and the two imitative SC coins are slightly better preserved than the four coins from Antioch.

The Aradus coin is either the base metal core of a plated forgery that has entirely lost its silver plating, or an irregular issue copying the coinage of Aradus that was intended as small change and not designed to deceive. There is no reason to

suppose that it was made in Aradus, and it may well be the product of a local or regional mint.<sup>5</sup>

Antiochene coins with SC in a wreath on the reverse are not unusual as site finds in Parthian Mesopotamia. Many specimens were found at Dura Europus on the Euphrates, and there are also numerous Antiochene SC coins from Assur on the Tigris.<sup>6</sup> Further examples were found at Kifrin on the Euphrates, and there are a few from Seleucia on the Tigris.<sup>7</sup> This SC coinage was imitated at Hatra, implying that it was current coin in the region.<sup>8</sup>

The examples listed here, of Claudius (AD 41-54), Nero (AD 54-68), Nerva (AD 96-98) and Trajan (AD 98-117) are typical of this material, and are among the commonest issues of the first century and early second century AD.<sup>9</sup> The SC coins found in the rescue excavations at Kifrin were also of Claudius or Nero, Nerva and Trajan. The Antiochene SC coins from Dura Europus and Assur indicate a distinct bias towards issues of this period, with later issues of Hadrian (AD 117-138), Antoninus Pius (AD 138-161) and Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-180) and Lucius Verus (AD 161-169) being less common.<sup>10</sup> Since SC bronzes of these rulers are common in the region of Antioch itself this bias is probably not a reflection of output at the Antioch mint, but of a bias in the pattern of circulation.

It is not at all clear whether the presence of such coinage indicates that there were close commercial links between northern Syria under Roman rule and Parthian Mesopotamia during the first and early second centuries. That would mean that a common pool of circulating coin connected the two regions. If we are to envisage a common pool of circulation then it would appear that those links declined after Trajan. Perhaps the advent of a home grown imitative SC coinage at Hatra (and perhaps from other mints in Mesopotamia as well) obviated the demand for genuine Antiochene SC coins.

The other possibility is that the SC coins were deliberately imported to Mesopotamia, either by some authority or authorities in the region, or by Roman troops campaigning in the region. It is entirely possible that the majority arrived in a single batch in the early second century, perhaps imported with Roman troops in connection with Trajan's Parthian war, AD 113-117.<sup>11</sup> Yet the fact that quite specific batches of Roman provincial coinage appear to have been overstruck to make Hatra coins could favour the idea that the SC coins were

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<sup>5</sup> The surfaces of the coin give it the appearance of a modern forgery, but this may be the result of over-enthusiastic cleaning at some point in the past.

<sup>6</sup> For Dura Europus see Bellinger 1949. The Greek and Roman coins from Assur are being studied by the author.

<sup>7</sup> Le Rider 1998: 75, 103 and plate 13 (Seleucia); Butcher forthcoming (Kifrin).

<sup>8</sup> Walker 1958, Slocum 1977, Al-Salihi 1972.

<sup>9</sup> *CRS*: 137-141.

<sup>10</sup> Bellinger 1949: 71-77, 203.

<sup>11</sup> The standard treatment of the campaign remains Lepper 1948.

deliberately imported by an authority in Mesopotamia instead.<sup>12</sup> There appears to have been at least a rudimentary selection process taking place in that no SC coins themselves appear to have been overstruck to make Hatra coins; instead coins of other cities in Roman Syria were used as raw materials: in particular issues of Laodicea ad mare, Zeugma and Hierapolis for Antoninus Pius (AD 138-161). This selective overstriking of non-SC type coins by local or regional powers suggests that there could have been a mechanism for importing specific groups of Roman coins to Parthian Mesopotamia.

The region where the SC coins were an important element of the circulating medium seems to have been confined to the northern part of Mesopotamia. The relatively small number of SC and imitative SC coins from Seleucia on the Tigris, compared to the large proportion of Parthian and civic coins of Seleucia found there, suggests that the SC and imitative issues were not a major feature of the currency in the south.<sup>13</sup> If these six coins from Sippar are typical of finds from the site it would suggest that Sippar belonged to the northern pool of circulation.

The two imitative coins also tend to support an association with the coinage circulating in northern Mesopotamia. These belong to a series of little known and poorly published coins that imitate the regular SC coinage of Antioch. Those of Hatra are the best known. These have the bust of the sun god Shamash on the obverse and a reverse that copies the Antiochene SC bronzes, but inverts the letters SC or shows them mirror image, with an eagle standing above them.<sup>14</sup> Another type, perhaps associated with another cult centre in Mesopotamia, has the bust of the moon god Sin on the obverse, and an inverted or mirror image SC on the reverse with a crescent instead of an eagle above.<sup>15</sup>

The first of these imitative coins (no. 6) belongs to a rather mysterious class of imitations of SC coins that were made by casting in moulds rather than by striking (as was normal for most coinages of the period). Slocum has attributed them to Hatra and suggested that they be dated to the third century AD.<sup>16</sup> In his arrangement of the Hatra coinage such cast imitative SC issues are designated 'Class 3' and constitute the final phase of Hatra's coin issues. He connects their crude quality with a period of crisis such as the Sasanian conquest of Hatra in AD 241.<sup>17</sup>

Two specimens of Slocum's Class 3 coinage were found in the Hatra excavations, but more evidence is needed to make the attribution to Hatra secure.<sup>18</sup> There is also a specimen from Assur, and this example from Sippar provides a third find spot. An attribution of the Class 3 cast coins to northern Mesopotamia, and the

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<sup>12</sup> A more detailed study of the pattern of Hatra overstrikes will be published by the author in relation to the coin finds from Assur.

<sup>13</sup> Le Rider 1998: 75, 103.

<sup>14</sup> Walker 1958: 167-170 ('type A'); Slocum 1977: 38-40 ('series 1').

<sup>15</sup> Walker 1958: 170-1 ('type B'); Slocum 1977: 45-6.

<sup>16</sup> Slocum 1977: 41-2.

<sup>17</sup> Slocum 1977: 44.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Salihi 1974: plate 2, 20-21, Slocum 1977: 42.

same pool of circulation as the Hatra coins, seems relatively assured and is thus suggestive of a Hatran origin, but no more can be said at present. As for the date, currently the only evidence would appear to be the coins themselves. In size and design they resemble genuine SC bronzes of the first and early second century up to the reign of Antoninus Pius, so if they are imitating contemporary SC coins they ought to belong before the third century.

In describing these Class 3 coins Slocum illustrates the letters SC on the reverses as inverted, just as on regular Hatra coins. However, it seems to me that on this class of coin the SC was meant to be the right way up. The wreath ties, always beneath the SC on regular Antiochene coins, are found in the same position on these coins. On the specimen from Sippar the wreath appears to consist of a single sprig of laurel wound in a circle, whereas on regular SC coins it is composed of two separate sprigs attached at top and bottom.<sup>19</sup>

The second of the two imitative SC coins (no. 7) is of a type not discussed in detail before. Numerous imitative SC coins with a completely blank obverse and an inverted SC with a crescent above have been found at Assur, raising the possibility that this class of SC imitations was made there.<sup>20</sup> The Sippar specimen is the only example to date that is recorded as coming from a site other than Assur. A number of the Assur specimens are overstruck on an issue of Caracalla (AD 212-217) from Carrhae in Roman Mesopotamia, and this specimen from Sippar furnishes us with a further example. Traces of the reverse type, a right-facing bust of a city goddess, can be seen on the 'blank' obverse of this coin (figs. 8 and 9). A specimen of the type of coin that was overstruck is included here for comparison (fig. 10).<sup>21</sup> Such overstrikes place at least a portion of these uniface imitative SC coins at the very end of the period of Parthian rule, or perhaps during the period when the Sasanians were attempting to establish control of the states and kingdoms of northern Mesopotamia. We may surmise that the production and circulation of imitative SC bronzes, and probably the circulation of regular Antiochene bronzes, did not continue much beyond this time; but only well-stratified material from dated archaeological contexts will settle the matter.

#### Figures

1. Coin of Aradus found at Sippar. BM 1953 12-2-1.
2. Coin of Claudius from Antioch found at Sippar. 1953 12-2-2.
3. Coin of Nero from Antioch found at Sippar. BM G 0939.
4. Coin of Nerva (?) from Antioch found at Sippar.
5. Coin of Trajan from Antioch found at Sippar.
6. Cast imitative SC coin found at Sippar.
7. Uniface imitative SC coin found at Sippar.
8. Enlargement of obverse of coin no. 7, rotated so as to present the undertype at the correct orientation.

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<sup>19</sup> This also appears to be the case for the specimen illustrated by Slocum 1977, plate 7, no. 23.

<sup>20</sup> Heidemann and Miglus 1996.

<sup>21</sup> For the undertype, see SNG Copenhagen, nos. 177-182. The specimen illustrated is from a private collection (19mm, 4.70g, axis 5 o'clock).

9. As previous, but with details of undertype picked out in white.
10. A specimen of the type of coin used for the undertype (Caracalla, Carrhae). Head of city goddess right, draped, veiled and wearing turreted head dress. COL MET ANTONINIANA [...].

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