

Dated Coins of Alexander Janneus

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THE chronological sequence of the various types in the coinage of Alexander Janneus (103-76 B. C.) is a matter of dispute since the beginnings of the study of Jewish numismatics. Some scholars consider the coins bearing the High Priest title to be the earliest, while others begin the list with those in which Alexander Janneus calls himself King. Since the various sequence-schemes were built on six or seven types, on none of which any indication of date was visible, the possibilities were quite numerous. Each scholar found in his scheme hints to various historical events in the twenty-seven years of Janneus' reign expressed by the Hebrew or Greek inscriptions and by the various symbols on these coins.

The present paper deals with one type which was called by Hill 'Imitations of Alexander Jannaeus' and described as follows: 'Obverse: Anchor within a broad circle, outside of which, inscr.:—' (ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ). 'Reverse: Wheel of eight rays, the felloe a circle of dots, outside of which, inscr. (usually unintelligible).'¹ Hill remarks elsewhere: 'As regards the wretched coins which seem to have been issued by some successors of Alexander Jannaeus, with his Greek inscription on the obverse, and on the reverse a Hebrew inscription outside the star of wheel, instead of between the spokes, . . . it must be confessed that neither on any of the specimens in this collection [i. e. in the British Museum—J. N.] nor on any casts that have been obtained from other sources, is the Hebrew inscription decipherable.'²

A recent evaluation of this type is quoted herewith: 'The autocratic regime and the suppression of the Pharisees caused the outbreak of civil war in Judea soon after Jannaeus suffered a defeat at the hands of the Nabateans east of the Jordan. The civil war is clearly reflected in the coins; the series now issued still bear a star on the obverse and an anchor with Greek inscription on the reverse. However, the design on the obverse is much more schematic and the Hebrew

¹ G. R. Hill: *A Catalogue of the Greek Coins in the British Museum* (henceforth *BMC*). *Palastine*, London, 1914, pp. 210-211.

² *Ibid.*, p. xcvi.

inscription is illegible. While still reflecting the original legend [יהונתן המלך —J.N.], it contains a meaningless group of signs including circles, distorted Hebrew characters, and other signs. True, ancient Hebrew characters were no longer in much use, but this 'barbarous imitation' shows how much all orderly administration had suffered during the uprising against the Sadducee king.³

In a most recent corpus, the 'Hebrew' legend was described as follows: 'enigmatic inscr. resembling square Hebrew script: in some instances, possibly מלכא אלכסנדרוס, in others, possibly יהונתן המלך.'⁴

Mr. H. Hirsch, a scholarly coin collector from Tive'on, drew my attention to this problem.⁵ While examining the coins, mainly those in the Hirsch collection, it became clear that, although the coins were struck off flan and only part of the complete legend is visible on each coin (see Pls. 2-3A), a reading is possible. The inscription (see Fig. 1) is in the Jewish (so-called square Hebrew) script and in the Aramaic language. It consists of מלכא אלכסנדרוס and the word שנת⁶ followed by the numerals ז' and, more often, כה.⁸ Thus we have dated coins of

³ B. Kanael: *BA* 26 (1963), p. 45.

⁴ Y. Meshorer: *Jewish Coins of the Second Temple Period*, Tel Aviv, 1967, p. 119, No. 9. It is interesting to note that as early as the 19th century there was an attempt to see in this legend a palaeo-Hebrew inscription consisting of the letters עִלְכְּזִרְעֵשׁ = Alexandras; see F. W. Madden: *Coins of the Jews*, London, 1881, pp. 96-97 and M. Narkiss: *Coins of Palestine I: Jewish Coins*, Jerusalem, 1936, p. 38, No. 12 (Hebrew). The reading מלכא אלכסנדרוס on a lead coin has been recently suggested by Father A. Spijkerman (see Meshorer, *op. cit.*, p. 118, No. 7A). A. Kindler, in *IEJ* 4 (1954), pp. 170-185, suggested that the various signs appearing on some 'wretched' coins of Alexander Janneus are 'square-Hebrew' letters.

⁵ Mr. H. Hirsch, who is interested in the numerous problems of Jewish numismatics, did not agree with the generally accepted view that these coins have meaningless signs. For some three years he examined many coins of his own and other public and private collections. Mr. Hirsch realized that the legend is in "square-Hebrew" and identified some letters. He discussed the problem with several scholars and showed the material to the author whose success in deciphering the legend is to be credited in no small part to Mr. Hirsch. The writer wishes to thank him for his efforts which led to the solution of the problem, as well as for his generous help in lending the coins of his collection and the material he had gathered.

Further thanks are due to Mr. A. Kindler for allowing me to examine the coins of the Kadman Numismatic Museum; to Mr. Y. Meshorer for searching the collections of the Department of Antiquities and the Bezalel Museum; to Messrs. L. Better of Haifa and M. Yaffe of Yif'at, who allowed me to see their private collections; and especially to Mr. K. Jenkins, Keeper of Coins, the British Museum, for providing me with casts of all these types in *BMC, Palestine*.

⁶ The word שנת is clearly visible in the illustrations given by some scholars; cf. A. Reifenberg: *Ancient Jewish Coins*, Jerusalem, 1947, No. 15; Kanael, *op. cit.* (above, n. 3), Fig. 7; Meshorer, *op. cit.* (above, n. 4), No. 9.

⁷ For שנת ז' see Pl. 3A: 16-17; in No. 17 the kaf is followed by a dot, which can be explained as a remnant of another letter; but in No. 16 the kaf is followed by the mem of מלכא.

⁸ For שנת כה, see Nos. 10-15 on Pls. 2 and 3A.

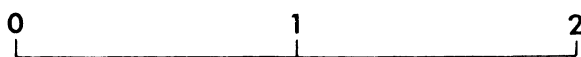
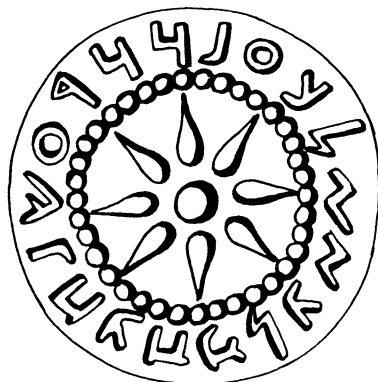


Fig. 1. Schematic reconstruction of legend.

the 20th and 25th years of Alexander Janneus, corresponding to 83 and 78 B.C. respectively.⁹

Since the letters were written in the margin surrounding a wheel or a star—which looks the same from all directions—it is difficult to determine the beginning of the inscription; it can therefore be read either *שנת כה מלכא אלכסנדרוס* or *מלכא אלכסנדרוס שנת כה*.¹⁰

As we would expect, the legend is written in the 'vulgar semiformal'—in Cross's terminology—a script 'readily adapted to use on hard surfaces.' . . . 'The vulgar semiformal hands normally exhibit some variety in style, fluctuating between formal and semicursive traditions.'¹¹ However, some letters on these coins display more cursiveness, so that they can hardly be called semicursive.¹²

⁹ It seems likely that, in addition to the 20th and the 25th years, other dates should also occur, but the material examined so far has not been sufficient to prove it. A coin in the British Museum appears to bear the date *שנת כג* (see the drawing in *BMC, Palestine*, p. 210, No. 10), but on examination of the cast the reading *שנת כה* is also possible, and even preferable.

¹⁰ The former is a common date formula in the Aramaic deeds, e. g. *ירח תחורת שנת 4 ארתחשטש מלכא* (Brooklyn Museum Elephantine Papyrus No. 11)—in some instances there is a *lamed* before the king's name. However, in coin legends the king's name seems to be primary, not the date; nevertheless, both possibilities occur, e. g. on the coinage of Agrippa II (Reifenberg, *op. cit.* [above, n. 6], pp. 49-54).

¹¹ F. M. Cross, Jr. in *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert III*, Oxford, 1962, pp. 217-221.

¹² E. g. the N-shaped *alef* and the circular *samekh*, and compare with Cross's semicursive examples in his paper in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. G. E. Wright, New York, 1961, pp. 133-202, Figs. 3-4.

The closest parallels to these letters are to be found on ossuaries.¹³ As the latter are generally attributed to the Herodian period and as the earliest known vulgar semiformal examples do not antedate this period, the palaeographical significance of this dated Hasmonean inscription is quite obvious.

The form מלכא אלכסנדרוס is not the common Aramaic word-order. In the Elephantine documents as well as in biblical Aramaic and other Aramaic sources, in the vast majority of cases מלכא follows the king's name, though there are several cases where מלכא precedes it.¹⁴ One may therefore suggest that מלכא אלכסנדרוס adopts the word order of ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ. But as we shall see below, it may be a literal translation from the palaeo-Hebrew legend, which seems to have been replaced by the Aramaic inscription.

The palaeo-Hebrew legend either within the 'spokes of the wheel' or on both sides of the flower and the palm-branch is generally read יהונתן המלך. The common biblical Hebrew word-order is א המלך and only rarely does יהונתן א occur, generally in the later books of the Old Testament.¹⁵ Thus the common royal name formula of the Judean monarchy may have been copied together with the archaic script.

The reading יהונתן המלך is not only possible in the inscription between the spokes of the wheel, where the beginning of the inscription cannot be determined, but also on those coins where it was written on both sides of the flower and palm-branch. Though exceptions occur,¹⁶ inscriptions written around the

¹³ For the N-shaped *alcf* see, e. g., E. L. Sukenik: *JPOS* 8 (1928), pp. 113-121, Pl. II:3 and esp. III:1, 2 (for a photograph of Pl. III:2, see J.-B. Frey: *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum* II, Rome, 1952, p. 310, No. 1363b.) and Sukenik: *Tarbiz* 6 (1934/35), pp. 190-196, Fig. 3 ('Kedron Dipinto').—For the box-headed *resh* see Frey's *Corpus*, No. 1354 (for a better photograph, see *Sepher Yerushalayim*, ed. M. Avi-Yonah, Jerusalem, 1956, Plate opp. p. 321 [Hebrew]). The *samekh* may be compared with Frey's *Corpus* No. 1290. The oblique base of the *lamed*, as far as we know, has no parallels.—For a description of the scripts on the ossuaries, see N. Avigad: *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 4 (1958), p. 77-81.

¹⁴ E. g. the Meissner Papyrus: בשנת 7 למלכא דרוש; Brooklyn Museum Papyrus No. 13: מלכא אמורטס and מפעורת (twice). There are six cases in biblical Aramaic (Daniel 2:28, 46; 4:15; 5:9, 11 and 6:10)—see H. Bauer-P. Leander: *Grammatik des Biblisch-Aramäischen*, Halle, 1927, § 93, pp. 317-318.

¹⁵ We counted 167 cases of א המלך and only 36 cases of יהונתן א, which are distributed as follows: Samuel—3; Kings—3; Jeremiah—2; Haggai—2; Zechariah (chap. 7)—1; Daniel—2; Ezra—2; Nehemiah—1 and Chronicles—20. Cf. E. Y. Kutscher: *The Language and Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll*, Jerusalem, 1959, p. 340 (Hebrew); Y. Peretz: *Papers of the Fourth World Congress of Jewish Studies* II, Jerusalem, 1968, pp. 123-127 (Hebrew).

¹⁶ As e. g. the legend שנת שתים (Reifenberg, *op. cit.* [above, n. 6], No. 147; Meshorer, *op. cit.* [above, n. 7], No. 153).

edge of the coins begin in most cases from the base of the object or figure represented. While the Greek inscriptions are written clockwise from the lowest point, the Hebrew inscriptions are written counter-clockwise. If we follow this way of writing, the legend around the flower and palm-branch should be read *המלך יהונתן*. Therefore it could be that *מלכא אלכסנדרוס*, which comes to replace the palaeo-Hebrew legend, may follow not the Greek word-order, but that of archaic Hebrew.¹⁷

While the word-order cannot be proved as being influenced by Greek, *אלכסנדרוס* is an Aramaic transcription of the Greek name. Talmudic sources have only either *ינאי המלך* or *ינאי מלכא*. Being a hypocoristicon, *ינאי* is not suitable for monumental writing on coins. It seems likely that not the Hebrew 'Jehonathan', but the Greek 'Alexandros' was the king's official name for both external and internal purposes.¹⁸

These coins appear to be the earliest known dated Jewish coins. They precede those of Herod¹⁹ by about half a century. But the first use of Hebrew letters as numerals was known in the coins of the First Jewish War, only one and a half centuries later. As far as we know, this is the earliest example of Semitic letters used as numerals, not only on coins but in any epigraphical source. On Phoenician coins the word *שח* is followed by the standard signs where vertical lines indicate the units and the horizontal (or oblique) strokes the tens. However, in 266/265 B. C. and later Ptolemy II Philadelphus issued coins in Phoenicia bearing Greek alphabetic numerals in a decimal system²⁰ based on a West Semitic prototype.

It is difficult to say why Janneus issued dated coins only in the third decade of his reign. It does not seem likely that such a small denomination (0.5-1.6 gr) could indicate either a jubilee or a festive mark of the stability of Janneus' rule.

At first sight, the use of the Aramaic language in Jewish script, both common among the Jews of this period, would not seem to need further comment.

¹⁷ The accepted reading by the scholars, *יהונתן המלך*, may have been influenced either by the talmudic *ינאי המלך* or by the coin legend *יהונתן הכהן הגדול*, also in palaeo-Hebrew. It should be mentioned that other appositions in the Bible like *הנביא*, *הכהן*, and *הספר*—in contrast to *המלך*—follow the name.

¹⁸ Josephus uses the name *Ἀλέξανδρος*, but see his *Antiquities* XIII, 320.—In the Talmudic sources, Alexander the Great is called *אלכסנדרוס*.

¹⁹ For the indication of the third year in Herod's coins, see M. Narkiss: *BJPES* 1:4 (1934), pp. 8-14 (Hebrew) and B. Kanael: *JQR* 42 (1951/52), pp. 261-264.

²⁰ J. N. Svoronos: *Die Münzen der Ptolemäer*, Athens, 1908, pp. 104 ff. My thanks are due to Mr. A. Spaer for this reference.

Nevertheless, as it is exceptional in Jewish coin-legends, an explanation is required. It would be simplest to assume that the occurrence of the Aramaic legend on these coins was an attempt to speak to the people in their own language and script; i.e. to enable all the Jews to read this legend, as neither Greek nor palaeo-Hebrew were their usual means of communication.

As mentioned above, these coins were struck in the years 83 and 78 B. C.²¹ According to Josephus,²² after Alexander's three-year campaign in Transjordan 'the Jews welcomed him eagerly because of his successes.' These three years were apparently ca. 83—80 B. C.²³ After this he was ill for another three years (evidently 79-76 B. C.) and on his deathbed he advised his wife to make peace with the Pharisees. The striking of a legend in the popular language and script was, thus, probably one of Janneus' attempts at appeasing the people towards the end of his reign.²⁴ Such attempts appear to have been made as early as the beginning of the third decade of Janneus' rule. It is not likely that the people, who had long opposed the militant king, suddenly welcomed him merely because of his successes on the battlefield.

These dated coins may provide a firm base on which the chronological sequence of the various Alexander Janneus coin-types can be built. However, this is a subject for scholars specializing in numismatics and the history of the Hasmoneans.

²¹ But see above, n. 9.

²² *Antiquities* XIII, 393-404; *War* I, 105-106.

²³ E. Schürer: *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes* I, Leipzig, 1901, p. 283.

²⁴ If we follow Diringer's view that the palaeo-Hebrew script was common among the Sadducees and that the Hasmonean coin legends were struck under their influence (*Essays and Studies Presented to S. A. Cook*, London, 1950, pp.46-49; *Leshonenu* 23 [1959], p. 150), the appearance of the Aramaic legend in Jewish script may be explained as a Pharisaic influence. For a recent evaluation of the palaeo-Hebrew script see F. M. Cross, Jr., *op. cit.* (above, n. 12), p. 189, n. 4; and *Harvard Theological Review* 57 (1964), p. 289. Actually, there is some reason to believe that the 'coterie of erudite scribes', by whom the palaeo-Hebrew script was presumably preserved as a biblical book hand, was the scribal circle of the Sadducee priesthood. For the Sadducee scribes, see E. E. Urbach: *Tarbiz* 27 (1958), pp. 166-182 and esp. p. 174 (Hebrew).

Appendix: A Selected List of Coins*

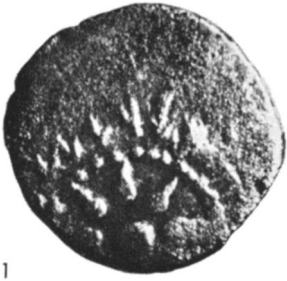
H. HIRSCH

THE coins listed here were selected from fifty-five of the type described above, belonging to four collections: Better (B); Hirsch (H); Kadman Numismatic Museum (KNM) and Yaffe (Y). All fifty-five specimens were thoroughly cleaned, and then weighed and measured. Their weight is 0.60-1.60 gr (average: 1.09 gr); size: 11-17 mm (average: 13.5 mm). The coins listed below are a selection for illustrating the Aramaic legend (see Pls. 2-3A).

	No.	Collection	Weight (gr)	Size (mm)		Legend
				Min.	Max.	
Pl. 2	1	H	1.20	13	13	— ה מלכא אל —
	2	H	0.90	13	14	— כא אלכ —
	3	KNM	1.15	12	14	— כא אלכס —
	4	B	1.50	14	14	— א אלכסנד —
	5	H	0.75	13	15	אלכס —
	6	KNM	0.85	13	15	אלכסנד —
	7	KNM	1.25	14	15	סנדרוס —
	8	H	1.20	13	15	דרוס —
	9	H	0.90	11	14	ס שנת —
	10	KNM	1.00	12	12	רוס שנת כה —
	11	KNM	1.25	12	13	רוס שנת כה —
	12	KNM	1.25	13	14	— ס שנת כה מלכ —
Pl. 3	13	H	0.90	13	14	— ס שנת כה מל —
	14	B	1.10	13	15	— נת כה מלכ —
	15	H	1.15	13	13	— ת כה מ —
	16	Y	1.15	12	14	— וס שנת כ מ —
	17	H	1.15	13	15	שנת כ. מלכ —

* I am adding this appendix on Dr. J. Naveh's request. I am greatly indebted to him and to Mr. A. Kindler for their generous help in its preparation.

PLATE 2



1



2



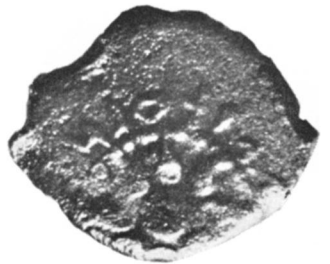
3



4



5



6



7



8



9



10



11



12

A

PLATE 3



13



14



15



16

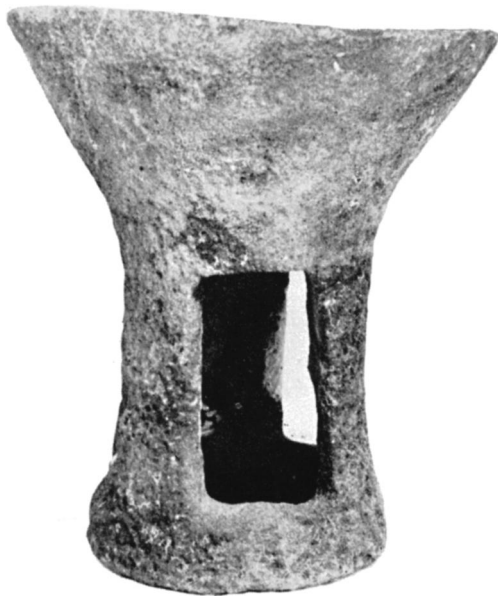


17a



17b

COINS OF ALEXANDER JANNEUS



B: Basalt Chalice from Tiberias.



C: Axehead from Kfar Monash.

RIA