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The Coins from Jebel Khalid, a Hellenistic City in Syria

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Looming today over the upper reaches of Lake Assad in Northern Syria, in ancient times the limestone bluff of Jebel Khalid commanded from the west a crossing of the river Euphrates. Its beautifully wrought fortification walls, though stripped to ground level since antiquity, betray its Hellenistic character. Fifty hectares in size, with a perimeter of almost four kilometres, the site is an impressive one. It lies roughly a hundred kilometres east of Aleppo (Beroia) and two hundred east of Antioch (see Map), but alas, no inscription survives to reveal its ancient name and, as we shall see, its early abandonment meant that it did not find mention in the itineraries and maps of Roman date.¹

Since the mid 1980s an Australian team of archaeologists led by Prof. Graeme Clarke of the Australian National University has excavated significant sections of the site, uncovering the foundations of an imposing Main Gateway and North West Tower, a luxurious peristyle mansion on the Akropolis thought to be the Governor's 'Palace', a large Temple, a Stoa or market-place and a sizeable Domestic Quarter. Imported pottery, such as Rhodian amphorae and Attic 'West Slope' ware, terracotta lamps and figurines, give important clues to the date of the settlement, but it is the 550 or so coins (almost all of them bronze) which are critical in any attempt to reconstruct the

history of the site in more precise fashion.

Of the identifiable coins found up until 1996, published in *Jebel Khalid* 1, 85% were Seleukid or of the Seleukid era.² Since then a further 240 coins have been found, over four seasons, and the pattern has not changed. Jebel Khalid is a rarity—practically a purely Hellenistic site. The earliest coins are a handful of coins of Alexander the Great; then there are seven of his general, Seleukos I 'Nikator' (Victor), who inherited his Asiatic realms. There follows an unbroken succession of coins of subsequent Seleukid rulers down to the last of the dynasty, with various peaks and troughs, then fifty 'autonomous' coins of the Metropolis of Antioch (considerably more than 10% of the identifiable total), dating from the 90s to the 70s BC (Table 1). Between 85 and 90% of the above coins were minted in Antioch. There are also some 'strays' from this period, coins minted in Cilicia, Cyprus, Phoenicia, Damascus, Seleukeia on Tigris, Ekbatana and elsewhere. After this there is a dramatic drop, with only a solitary coin (from Commagene) datable to later in the first century BC and a mere smattering of coins from the first three centuries of the Roman Empire. There is a minor peak in the fourth century and a few Byzantine and early Islamic pieces.

Given the above numismatic pattern

and the broader historical context it seems highly probable that Jebel Khalid was a foundation of Seleukos I; a possible context is c.301–300 BC after his march west and acquisition of Northern Syria, when several Macedonian rivals still threatened his possessions and the natives may have been a problem for him. It was then that he founded Antioch, Seleukeia in Pieria, Laodikeia and Apamea, as well as other places closer to Jebel Khalid such as Zeugma further upstream on the Euphrates.³

The striking preponderance of coins minted in Antioch from all periods of the settlement might help clarify the nature of the place. This near monopoly of the Antioch mint and the character of the site—the fortified walls, the Governor’s ‘Palace’, seal impressions indicating contact with royal administrators⁴—suggest that Jebel Khalid was a garrison city, with coins shipped regularly from the capital by government authority to pay a garrison and city officials. When they left, the flow of coins ended.

At first glance it might appear odd that a site dominating a crossing of the Euphrates should have yielded so few coins minted in the East. Does this suggest there was little trade? No, our numismatic evidence cannot bear such weight. We must remember that nearly all our excavation coins are bronze. While bronze coins can travel much further than it is sometimes argued, they cannot be held to be crucial elements in long-distance trade. Other objects such as imported amphorae, lamps and figurines show that Jebel Khalid had widespread contacts.

To turn to the question of the end

of the settlement, the archaeological and numismatic evidence reinforce each other nicely. The sudden cessation of coins minted after the 70s BC reflects the deliberate abandonment of the site. Furniture, tiles, roof-beams—everything that could be transported was removed. A barren layer of wind-blown dust and sand overlies the remains; then makeshift secondary occupation intrudes. The coin-users had gone. Their successors, whoever they were, had no need of, or no access to, coined money. The last batches of coins, the ‘Metropolitan’ coins of Antioch, are still dated by the Seleukid era. The series runs from 92 to 72, but the latest we have found dates to 77–76. The larger denomination features Zeus; his bearded head adorns the obverse; the reverse shows him seated on his throne, holding a figure of Nike (Victory; see Coin 1). The legend reads ANTIOCHEON TES METROPOLEOS—[coin] ‘of the Metropolis of the Antiochenes’.

The gap in the coinage at Jebel Khalid is not because no coins were being minted in Antioch after the 70s BC. On the contrary, large numbers of coins dating to the time of Caesar and Augustus were found in the Antioch excavations, and coins of this period reach Abou Danné and Tell el Hajj, not far from Jebel Khalid. But they don’t reach Jebel Khalid itself. Perhaps the abandonment of the site is to be linked with the general collapse of the Seleukid Empire, or more specifically, it might be that in his ‘settlement’ of Syria in 64 BC Pompey the Great decided that a fortification was no longer needed at this site.

What of the rhythm of life at Jebel Khalid



Coin 1. Metropolitan Zeus from Antioch (year 236 = 77/76 BC). *Obv:* Zeus; *rev:* Zeus std. I. on throne.



Coin 2. Philip Philadelphos. *Obv:* Philip diad.; *rev:* Zeus std. holding Nike.



Coin 3. Ptolemy VI. *Obv:* Zeus Ammon; *rev:* Eagle.



Coin 4. Arados. *Obv:* Tyche (city goddess); *rev:* Nike (Victory).

identifiable non-Seleukid coins came from the Temple area and eight of these date from long after the ‘abandonment’; it might appear that the Temple still attracted visitors when the rest of the settlement was a ruin. In 2005, in a quest to find the boundaries of the sacred enclosure of the Temple, extensive secondary domestic occupation was disclosed. The coins date this neatly. Of forty-one coins, as many as half date to the first decades of the first century BC and only three before 150 BC. In the history of Jebel Khalid, this is late indeed.

Finally, a look at some individual coins (Coins 2–4);

2] Philip I Philadelphos (93–83 BC). Bronze. Antioch mint. 23–24 mm, 14.2 gm.

Obv: Head of Philip, diademed, r.

Rev: Zeus std. I. on throne holding Nike.

To Γ , BASILEO[S] PHILIPPO[U]; to Λ , EIPHANOU[S] PHILA]DELPHO[U];

in exergue, T.

This bronze replicates the type of Philip’s tetradrachms. Four such bronzes, struck from four different (and worn) dies, were found in the excavations of Antioch. Their publisher thought that they were contemporary or near-contemporary forgeries, once silver-plated; another scholar demonstrated that tetradrachms of Philip were forged in the period 53–17/16 BC. But these bronzes are not uncommon and the number of dies involved suggests they were a regular issue.⁵ Furthermore, the virtual absence of coins at Jebel Khalid from the late 70s to the Augustan period, and the presence of very large numbers of coins dating from the 90s to 70s, reinforces the view that this coin, at least, was struck in Philip’s life-time.

3] Ptolemy VI (180–145). Bronze. Cyprus mint (?). c.176–170 (?). 23 mm, 10.7 gm.

Obv: Zeus Ammon r, horned, w. diadem

and floral ornament.

Rev: Eagle w. closed wings, l, on thunderbolt; in front, lotus. To r, BASILEOS; to l, [PTOLEMAIOU]; between legs, EUL [Eulaios was a regent in Ptolemy's minority].

Two other examples were found at Jebel Khalid, one of them countermarked on the reverse with a Seleukid anchor. They are the only Ptolemaic coins that have been found on our site. They are usually thought to have been minted in Cyprus, though Alexandria has been proposed. As for the countermark, the best explanation is perhaps that these coins returned in numbers with Antiochos IV's troops to Seleukid realms as booty.

4] Arados (Phoenicia) [modern Arwad, near Tartus, Syria] c137–46. 26–27 mm. 15.7 gm.

Obv: Bust of Tyche r, w. turreted crown, veil falling on shoulder.

Rev: Nike advancing l, holding aphlaston (poop ornament of naval vessel) and palm branch; to r, ARADION; to l, illegible date in Greek and Phoenician letters.

celebrating the naval strength of the semi-autonomous island city-state. According to the catalogues it should be a silver tetradrachm, but both our specimens appear to have a leaden appearance. I have not come across any metal analyses of these coins to confirm my hunch that they are debased.

Notes

1. I owe this point, and much else, to Graeme Clarke.
2. *Jebel Khalid on the Euphrates: Report on Excavations 1986–1996*, vol. 1, eds GW Clarke et al, Sydney, 2002.
3. See *Jebel Khalid I*, pp 293–5. A recent writer, Peter Fraser, *Cities of Alexander the Great* (Oxford, 1996) has argued convincingly that Seleukos was a much more prolific city founder than Alexander.
4. Eg, those stamped with the Seleukid anchor.
5. See A Houghton, *Coins of the Seleucid Empire*, New York, 1983, p 25.

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This was a long-lasting issue,