Cypriote coinage under Roman rule (30 BC – 3rd century AD)

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In 30 BC, after the death of Cleopatra and Marc Antony, Cyprus fell under the direct control of Octavian. But in 22 BC, Augustus ceded the island to the Senate to be governed by proconsuls of praetorian status. They were generally unpromising senators who rarely reached higher status after their service in Cyprus.

Cyprus became a modest province and was no more a place of great strategic importance in the Roman empire. This modesty is reflected by its coinage struck with intermissions from Augustus to Caracalla. As no colony was founded on the island, the Cypriote coinage is a provincial one and does not consist of different city coinages. Though relatively scarce, it is nonetheless interesting as it takes different forms: it was issued either by the league of Cypriote cities, the *Koinon Kyprion*, which of course was in charge of the imperial cult; or by the proconsuls, as a few issues make no reference to Cyprus on their legends, but have local designs and circulated only in Cyprus; or directly by the emperor or a member of his entourage, as other issues make no reference to Cyprus and have imperial designs, but are only found on the island.

Augustan and Tiberian coins are in Latin, Claudian coins are bilingual, the subsequent coinage is in Greek: this development follows a general trend. Civic and provincial coinages, at least in the eastern part of the Empire, are the sign of the Hellenic cultural identity. Greek were no more their own masters, but they were proud to be Greek, and issuing coinage in Greek, with local types, was a way to assert their identity, which remained intact under the Roman dominium. It must also be stressed that there were few Roman citizens settled on the island.

Coinage in the name of the *Koinon Kyprion*

Bronze coinage was struck by the *Koinon* under Claudius, probably in 43/4 AD, Galba in 68/9 AD, Vespasian and his sons Titus and Domitian in 75/6 AD, Trajan in 114-6 AD, and Septimius Severus, Julia Domna, Caracalla, and Geta.

On the coinage of Claudius, only the name of the *Koinon* is figured on the reverse in a laurel wreath [Fig. 1]. From Galba to Trajan, Zeus *Salaminios* and the temple of Paphian Aphrodite
are designed on the reverse, together with the name of the Koinon. Different denominations were struck under Claudius, Vespasian and Trajan, corresponding to Roman sestertii, dupondii and asses. The Claudian coinage has a local style and was probably struck at Paphos, the political capital of the island in the Roman period, and this is also the case of the issues in the name of Galba. The Flavian and Trajanic [Fig. 2] coinages feature, together with the name of the Koinon, designs which prove they were intended to circulate in Cyprus, but they have a distinct imperial character. They consist of orichalcum sestertii and dupondii and copper asses, and analyses have shown that they were surely minted in Rome and shipped to Cyprus. The Severan dynasty retains only the design of the temple of Paphian Aphrodite, struck for Septimius Severus, [Fig. 3] Julia Domna, Caracalla and Geta. In the case of Geta, two obverse types stand apart: one [Fig. 4] shows the nude torso of the emperor from the back holding a spear, the other [Fig. 5] the laureate head of the emperor with a spear pointing to the right. But new and rare types were introduced at the time: Tyche standing full face in a tetrastyle temple with a Syrian arch on sestertii of Caracalla, Julia Domna and Geta [Fig. 6], the name of the Koinon in a wreath on dupondii (?) of Julia Domna, an eagle with wreath in beak and a Victory driving a biga on dupondii (?) of Caracalla, a Victory walking left on asses (?) of Geta.

Coinage with Cypriote types issued by the proconsuls

Only two proconsuls signed coinage. The first, Plautius, introduced the types of the cult statue of Zeus Salaminios and the Paphian temple of Aphrodite. It has been suggested that this emission might have a connection with the transfer of the island to the Senate in 22 AD, but it is also possible that Plautius was a proconsul in 1/2 AD. The second, Cominius Proculus, struck coinage under Claudius, probably in 43/4 AD. Unsigned coinages with Cypriot designs were also probably ordered by the Roman representatives on the island. This is the case of the coinage honouring Drusus Minor, probably struck in 22 AD, when Paphos and Salamis conformed to the right of asylum long enjoyed by their temples. The other case is the production of silver coinage struck under the Flavians. Tetradrachms were struck for Vespasian [Fig. 7], years 8 to 10, and for Titus as Augustus, year 2. Didrachms were issued in the names of Titus and Domitian under Vespasian, year 9. Therefore, this coinage dates from 75 to 78 AD and 79/80 AD. The fineness of these coins is around 90%. It has been argued that the production stopped in 78 AD, because the island suffered a major earthquake which destroyed Paphos, Salamis, and perhaps Kourion and Amathous. But the typical Syrian formula on the reverse, ETOYC NEOY IEOY, and the
A stylistic link between the bronze Antiochene coinage and the silver with Cypriote designs, make it likely that this silver was actually minted in Antioch, as the bronze coins of the same period, with the name of the Koinon Kyprion, were minted in Rome and shipped to Cyprus.

Coinage with imperial types issued for circulation in Cyprus

The first coinage issued after 30 BC was struck in honour of Augustus: it is precisely dated to 26 BC, as the reverse legend bears COS OCTAVO DESIG IX. The reverse type - Nike on globe holding wreath and palm - echoes the Victory type struck in Rome after Actium. The attribution to Cyprus is certain, as these coins frequently occur on the island, and nowhere else. The official who ordered this provincial issue (featuring all the characteristics of an imperial one) was certainly the legatus of Cyprus. Probably at the same time, coins of the CA series, whose nuclear mint was in Asia, were produced in Cyprus, in a branch mint. To refer to M. Grant’s terminology, these coins were part of a "supra-provincial" coinage. Provincial imperial coins were struck again in 1 AD, when Caius Caesar, Augustus’ grandson, held his consulate. Caius was then in the East and might have passed by Cyprus. These coins also honour Augustus, Pater Patriae, a title which he had received in 2 BC. From the same period date two other provincial components of an imperial series, with Augustus’ portrait on the obverse and AVGVST [Fig. 8] or SC in wreath on the reverse. Their attribution to Cyprus seems certain because their style is similar to the Caius’ series and also because they are found on the island. Under Tiberius, and later on, under Antoninus Pius, coins imitating imperial types were struck; their attribution to Cyprus is again due to the fact that they are found only on the island. Under Tiberius, dupondii and asses, with Latin legends, represent a radiate head of Divus Augustus [Fig. 9] or Livia seated with patera and sceptre on their reverses imitating imperial coins struck in Rome in 15/16 AD. This process was repeated under Antoninus Pius when series of sestertii and dupondii, with Greek legends, featuring portraits of the emperor on the obverse and of Marcus Aurelius Caesar on the reverse [Fig. 10], were struck on the island, where they are commonly found. The mint at Rome began to strike coins in honour of Marcus Aurelius in 139 AD and, therefore, the Cypriote coins should be dated accordingly to the 140s. The last series whose legends are entirely composed of imperial names and have no explicit reference to Cyprus, but are common on the island, was struck for Caracalla Augustus and Geta Caesar, and then for Augustus [Fig. 11], probably at the end of Severus’ reign and at the beginning of Caracalla and Geta’s joint reign in 208 (?) - 210 AD. Just like the previous ones, this case raises the problem of the authority ordering this issue.
Countermarks

Numerous countermarks are found on Cypriote coins as a way to remonetize worn coins. The first coins which bear a countermark are those of Galba, but it is illegible and it is, therefore, difficult to understand when it was applied. Titus and Domitian countermarked worn coins of Augustus and Claudius. Then, under Trajan, a rectangular countermark with TRAJAN/DACIC was applied on worn coins with large flans, probably issued under Claudius. Circular countermarks with Hadrian’s laureate head and the legend AYTO KAI ADPI were applied on coins already countermarked by Trajan. The fact that these countermarks go in pairs does not necessarily imply that they were applied at the same time, and the use of the countermark TRAJAN/DACIC under Hadrian seems unlikely. Moreover, the countermark with Hadrian is sometimes partly struck over the Trajanic one which, in any case, seems much more worn than the Hadrianic punch, a fact indicating that it was applied earlier. Hadrian is known to have restored Salamis after it was devastated by the Jewish insurrection in 116 AD. The emperor was hailed as Salamis’ "[father] and benefactor" in 123 AD and he might have briefly visited Salamis in 129/130. The countermark might have been applied as a means to raise funds for the restoration of the city. Under Marcus Aurelius, a countermark was applied on silver coins struck by the Flavians. This circular countermark shows a laureate head of the emperor with the legend ANTOC I V (or VI), which has been expanded as Anto(ninus) C(os) I(mperator) V or VI and was applied on the tetradrachms and the didrachms. The same coins were also countermarked under Caracalla and Julia Domna, though the occurrences are rarer, probably to be re-evaluated.

Circulation

Apart from the Cypriote coinage, other coins circulated in Cyprus. Roman denarii have been found in excavations at Kourion, Soloí, and Paphos. Hoards of denarii are known to exist on the island, buried at Amathous under Vespasian and at Larnaka (?) under the reign of Commodus. A wide variety of bronze coinages is found at Kourion and Paphos, but it is interesting to notice that Jewish issues mostly dated from the first half of the 1st century AD are prominent attesting either “the strong ties the island enjoyed with Judaea” or the arrival of many Jews on the island after the First Revolt in Judaea. In the 2nd century AD and the beginning of the 3rd, Roman coins, mainly sestertii, dominate over...
Cypriote bronzes.

Conclusion

The end of local coinage came earlier than in most areas of the Eastern Roman empire. Other series that have been given to Cyprus include: silver tetradrachms of Caracalla with an eagle on an ear of wheat on the reverse, and bronze coins of Elagabalus and Severus Alexander, with ΔΕ above star within wreath. In the former case, the attribution comes from Seyrig, and it has been accepted, yet without much evidence. In the latter case, although these coins are very common on the island, they are usually attributed to Antioch.

Cassius Dio, in Book 52 Chapter 30 of his Roman History, puts the following words into the mouth of Gaius Maecenas, friend of Augustus, who died in 8 BC, as a piece of advice to the new master of the oikoumenē. He suggests that none of the peoples now under Augustus' rule "have currency or weights or measure of their own; instead let them use ours". Given that Dio was a contemporary of the Emperor Severus Alexander, and a consul along with him in 229 AD, these remarks may seem strange at the very time when so many Greek cities had been striking their own coins; yet they apply perfectly to Cyprus.
List of illustrations

The images that follow are available in the digital version of the present article in the website Kyprios Character. You can view the images by following the link: kyprioscharacter.eie.gr/en/t/AT

Fig. 1: Claudius, sestertius, RPC I 3927 © Coin Archives, R. Künker 124, 16 March 2007, lot 8851.

Fig. 2: Trajan, dupondius, RPC III, 3752 © Coin Archives, Classical Numismatic Group MBS 66, 19 May 2004, lot 1222.

Fig. 3: Septimius Severus, sestertius © Coin Archives, Classical Numismatic Group 97, 17 September 2014, lot 484.

Fig. 4: Geta, sestertius © Coin Archives, Roma Numismatics E-Sale 12, 1 November 2014, lot 1048.

Fig. 5: Geta, sestertius, Paris FG 831 © Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Fig. 6: Geta, sestertius, Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation 2003-04-04 © Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation.

Fig. 7: Vespasian, tetradrachm, RPC II, 1803 © Coin Archives, Gorny and Mosch 160, 9 October 2007, lot 2015.

Fig. 8: Augustus, RPC I, 3914 © Coin Archives, Numismatica Ars Classica 38, 21 March 2007, lot 8.

Fig. 9: Tiberius Paris FG 4795, RPC I, 3918 © Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Fig. 10: Antoninus/Marcus Aurelius © Coin Archives, Classical Numismatic Group E Auction 229, 10 March 2013, lot 313.

Fig. 11: Caracalla/Geta © Coin Archives, Classical Numismatic Group E Auction 271, 11 January 2012, lot 348.
Endnotes

1 *RPC* I, 3927-3931.
2 *RPC* I, 3934-3935.
3 *RPC* II, 1818-1826.
4 *RPC* III, 3403-3408, pl. 169.
5 Parks 2004, 23.
6 Parks 2004, 24, though her coinage should be divided into the reigns of Septimius Severus and Caracalla, according to her hairstyle.
7 Parks 2004, 25.
8 Parks 2004, 26; Amandry 2009.
10 Parks 2004, 23.
12 Parks 2004, 25.
14 Parks 2004, 26; Amandry 2009, 2.
15 Amandry 2009, 3.
16 Parks 2004, 29c.
18 Parks 2004, 31; Amandry 2009, 1.
19 Parks 2004, 27.
20 Parks 2004, 29a and b.
22 *RPC* I, 3906-3907; Parks 2004, 2a-b.
23 Parks 2004, 43.
24 *RPC* I, 3932-3933; Parks 2004, 11b.
25 *RPC* I, 3921-3926; Parks 2004, 10a-c.
26 *RPC* II, 1801-1807, 1812-1815.
27 *RPC* II, 1816-1817.
28 *RPC* II, 1808-1811.
29 *RPC* I, 3904-3905; Parks 2004, 1.
30 Howgego 1982, group 6; Parks 2004, 5.
31 Grant 1953, 14.
32 *RPC* I, 3908-3913; Parks 2004, 6.
33 *RPC* I, 3914-3915.
34 RPC I, 3917-3918; Parks 2004, 8.
35 RPC I, 3919; Parks 2004, 9.
36 Parks 2004, 21.
37 Parks 2004, 28.
38 For a catalogue of these countermarks, see Nicolaou 1989 and Parks 2004, 241-249.
39 GIC 538.
40 GIC 565, 108.
41 GIC 603.
42 GIC 38.
44 GIC 844.
45 Cox 1959.
46 Gjerstad et. al. 1937.
47 Nicolaou 1990.
49 Metcalf 1979.
50 Cox 1959; Nicolaou 1990; Christou 2013.
51 Parks 2004, 141.
52 Parks 2004, 32.
53 Parks 2004, 33-34.
54 Seyrig 1932.
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Abbreviations:


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