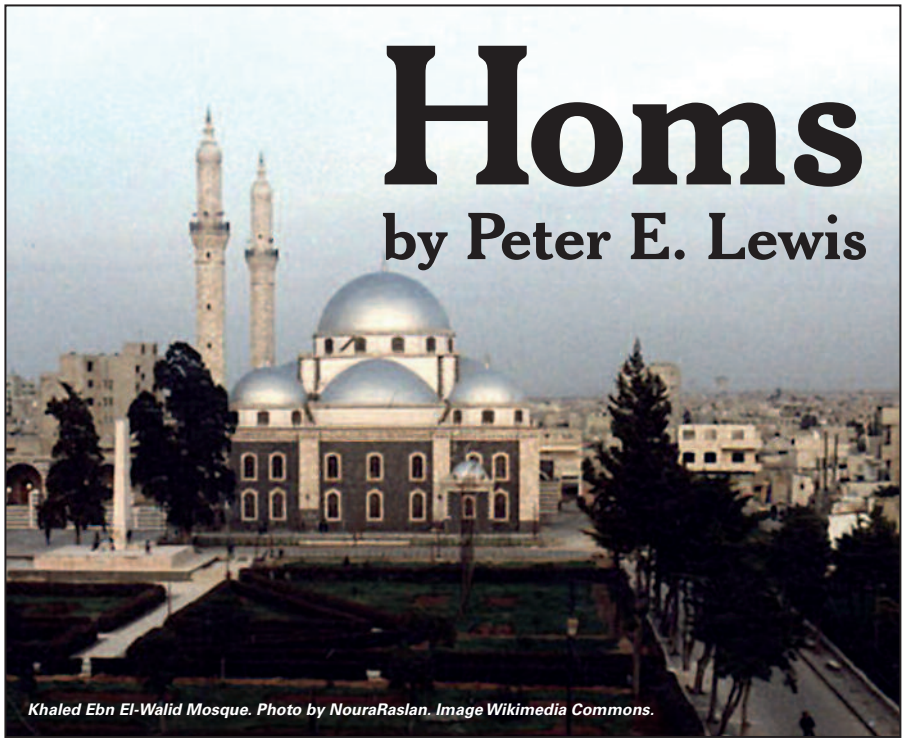
Homs

by Peter E. Lewis



Khaled Ebn El-Walid Mosque. Photo by NouraRaslan. Image Wikimedia Commons.

LAST year a friend of mine, who is a coin dealer, asked me to look at 150 unidentified ancient coins that he had in his stock. I really enjoy identifying ancient coins because one never knows what surprises may lie ahead and there is a great sense of satisfaction when a particularly difficult coin is identified. Moreover, unless coins are identified they remain worthless lumps of metal. I was bringing them to life again, and with 150 to identify I was like a pig in mud!

Most of the coins were, as one would expect, small bronze coins from the 3rd, 4th and 5th centuries AD, and the coins of Constantine the Great and his sons were particularly common. Some were very rare, but two rather worn coins caught my attention. (Figures 1 and 2) They were small bronze coins minted in the 7th century in the Syrian city of Homs. In Arabic the city is known as Ḥimṣ, and in ancient times, Emisa or Emesa. The city had been very much in the news at the time with disturbing images on television showing dead bodies and destroyed buildings, and the coins made me think of its long history and the diversity of coins that had been minted there.

Figure 1 – Bronze coin minted at Homs c. 688-693 AD. 20 mms diameter. It is an Arab-Byzantine coin from the early Islamic period. There is a diagram of it in Figure 16.

In recent years a large proportion of the Muslim population of Homs had opposed the government of President Bashar al-Assad, and many people were killed. In the process a large part of the city was demolished. (Figure 3) In May 2014 the opposition forces left the city following an agreement with the government. Actually something similar had occurred in the 9th century, when the inhabitants of the city were largely Christian and the government was Muslim. According to *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the city of Emesa "was taken in 636 by

Figure 2 – Bronze coin minted at Homs c. 700 AD. 16 mms diameter. It is an early post-reform Islamic coin. There is a diagram of it in Figure 18.

Figure 3 – Destruction in the Bab Dreeb area of Homs, 5th April 2012. (Wikimedia Commons)

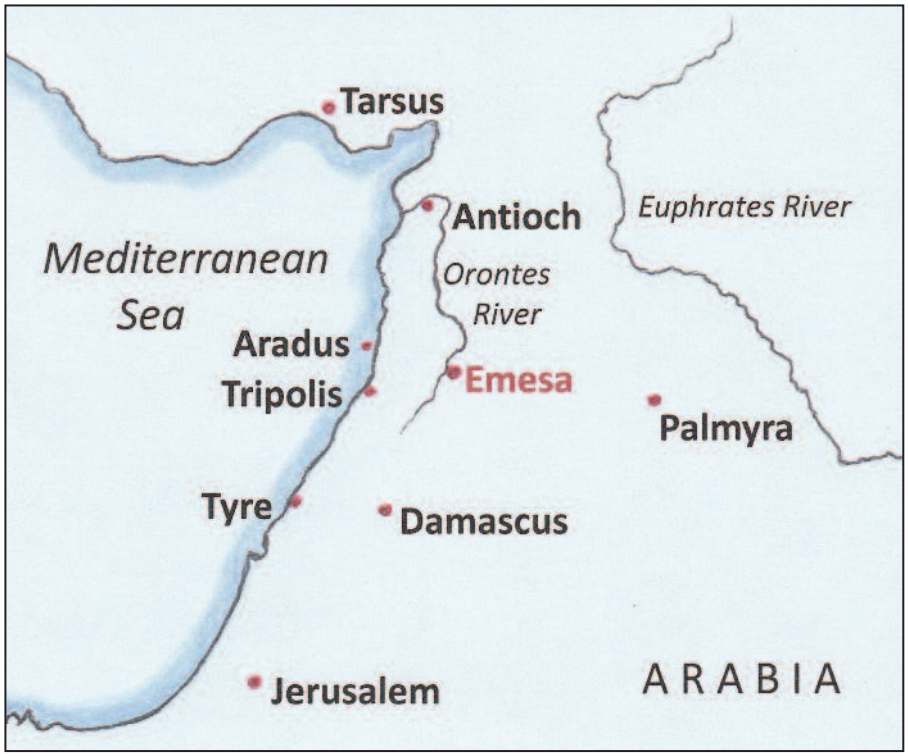


Figure 4 – Map drawn by the author to show the position of Emesa (modern Homs).

the Muslims, who renamed it Ḥimṣ, and the city's large Christian element was eliminated during the rebellion of 855, when the churches were demolished and the Christians executed or deported." There is nothing new under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

Anyway, let's start at the beginning.

Figure 5 – Bronze coin of Antoninus Pius minted at Emesa showing the sun-god on the reverse. 20 mms diameter. (Jean Elsen & ses Fils, Auction 121, Lot 395)

Figure 6 – Bronze coin of Antoninus Pius minted at Emesa showing an eagle above the stone of Emesa. 25 mms diameter. (Vcoins: Ancient Imports)

There has been a settlement at Homs for thousands of years because it is just east of a gap in the mountain range that separates the coast from the hinterland. Excavations at the citadel of Homs showed evidence of settlement from 2300 BC. In ancient times it was at a junction of roads from the north and the south and from Palmyra in the east. (Figure 4 - map) Palmyra prospered because caravans from Asia unloaded their goods there. Little is known about

Figure 7 – Bronze coin of Caracalla (198-217 AD) showing the temple of Emesa. Notice the "tall triangular top" at the front. 29 mms diameter. (Roma Numismatics Ltd, Auction 4, Lot 2313)

Figure 8 – Bronze coin of Caracalla showing his mother, Julia Domna, on the obverse, and the altar or base for the stone of Elagabal on the reverse. The structure has 2 levels with 3 figures under arches on each level. Perhaps the figures were ancestors of Julia who was the daughter of the high priest. 23 mms diameter. (Vcoins: Moneta Numismatic Services)

the early history of Emesa, but in the first century BC there was a dynasty of kings called Sampsigeramus, which means "Shamash has enlightened". Shamash was the Assyrian sun-god who was worshipped at Emesa. Emesa's independence came to an end when it was incorporated into the Roman province of Syria during the reign of the Roman emperor Vespasian (69-79 AD).

Coins were first minted at Emesa during the reign of Antoninus Pius (138-161 AD) and the coins refer to the sun-god. One shows his radiate bust (Figure 5) and another shows the stone of Emesa surmounted by an eagle. (Figure 6) This black, conical stone was probably a meteorite. It represented the god Elah-Gabal (also written Elagabal), a name which means "God of the Mountain". It is not clear whether the sun-god was an emanation of Elagabal, or vice versa. Henri Seyrig, a French numismatist, suggested that Elagabal was the supreme Lord or high god, while the actual sun-god of Emesa was Shamash. Ya'akov Meshorer, who was Professor of Numismatics at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, considered that Elagabal was the sacred stone, which was the material embodiment of the sun-god.

The Romans were clever when dealing with foreign gods: instead of opposing them or suppressing their cults they assimilated them. So the Greek Zeus was considered to be the same as their Jupiter, and the high god of Emesa was also equated with Jupiter. Such a strategy ingratiated the Romans with the people in the provinces. The eagle, which was associated with the stone of Emesa, as seen on the coin in Figure 6, was also the symbol of Jupiter. No doubt Antoninus Pius was concerned to improve relations with subjugated peoples following the disastrous Second Jewish Revolt (132-135 AD) and so a great temple was built at Emesa during his reign. Avienus, a 4th century Latin writer, described the temple: "The temple of Emesa, rising high, glistens in the first rays of the sun. . . Higher than the Lebanese peaks green with opulent cedar, the temple of Emesa jealously competes, showing off its tall triangular top." This temple (Figure 7), the altar or base for the stone (Figure 8) and the stone with an eagle displayed on the front (Figure 9) feature on the coins of Emesa.

After Antoninus Pius several Roman emperors minted coins at Emesa. In 215 AD Caracalla issued silver tetradrachms

Figure 9 – Bronze coin of Caracalla showing the eagle in front of the stone of Elagabal with 2 parasols above. 30 mms diameter. (Baldwin's Auction 59-60, Lot 761)

Figure 10 – Silver tetradrachm of Caracalla minted at Homs showing an eagle with the sun-god between its legs. 25 mms diameter. (Vcoins: Vilmar Numismatics)

Figure 11 – Gold aureus of Elagabalus (218-222 AD) minted at Emesa showing the stone of Elagabal in a chariot drawn by 4 horses. The stone is ornamented with an eagle. Similar coins were minted in several cities to celebrate its journey to Rome. (Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 72, Lot 698)

Figure 12 – A silver drachm of the Sasanian king, Shapur I (241 – 272 AD) showing his bust on the obverse and a fire altar, flanked by two attendants, on the reverse. 25 mms diameter. (Vcoins: Zuzim)

Figure 13 – Gold aureus of Uranius Antoninus (253-254 AD) minted at Emesa showing the stone of Elagabal being transported in a chariot drawn by 4 horses, as in Figure 11. (Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 54, lot 559)

Figure 14 – Bronze coin of Uranius Antoninus minted at Emesa showing the stone of Elagabal in the temple with the eagle but without a base. 32 mms diameter. (Roma Numismatics Ltd, Auction 7, Lot 914)

Figure 15 – Bronze coin of the Byzantine emperor Constans II (641-668 AD) minted at Constantinople showing him holding a long cross and a globe with a cross on top. The large 'm' on the reverse is the denomination (40), and below it 'E' means the 5th workshop and 'II' is the number of years of Constans' reign (2).

Figure 16 – Diagram of the coin in Figure 1. On the obverse the Arabic word to the right of the figure is the mint name, Ḥimṣ. To the left is the Greek word, ΚΑΛΟΝ (good). On the reverse the Greek word, EMICHC, means 'of Emisa'. The Arabic word below the 'm' is ṭayyib (good). The 'm' is the denomination (40).

with his laureate bust on the obverse and an eagle on the reverse. Between the eagle's legs there is a bust of the sun-god. (Figure 10) These tetradrachms are generally considered to have been minted at Emesa although this is not indicated on the coin. In their book, *The Syro-Phoenician Tetradrachms and their Fractions,* Michel and Karin Prieur suggested that the mint was Hatra, an Arab city in Mesopotamia, where Shamash was worshipped.

When Caracalla died in 217 AD he was succeeded by Macrinus who issued similar tetradrachms. But Caracalla had been popular with the Roman soldiers and when his aunt, Julia Maesa, who resided in the family home at Emesa, spread rumours that her grandson was the bastard son of Caracalla, the soldiers revolted, killed Macrinus and hailed her grandson as the new emperor. He took the name of his supposed father, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, but as he was the high-priest of Elagabal at Emesa he was generally known as Elagabalus. The problem was that Elagabalus was an immature, wilful lad, only 14 years old. Moreover he was probably homosexual, and his outrageous behaviour as emperor shocked the people of Rome. The stone of Emesa was carried in a chariot drawn by four horses all the way to Rome (Figure 11) and in the city Elagabalus walked backwards facing the stone as was the custom of the high-priest in Emesa. Herodian, a contemporary historian, described the scene: "Antoninus ran along in front of the chariot, but facing backwards as he ran looking at the god and holding the bridles of the horses. . . But to stop him tripping and falling while he was not looking where he was going, lots of sand gleaming like gold was put down, and his bodyguard supported him on either side to make sure he was safe as he ran like this."

The depravity of the wild teenager was too much even for the citizens of Rome and in 222 AD he was murdered and replaced by his cousin, Severus Alexander, who sent the stone back to Emesa. In 252 AD the Sasanian king, Shapur I (Figure 12), invaded Syria. He divided his army to simultaneously attack Antioch and Emesa. Antioch was sacked, but the people of Emesa led by the high priest, Uranius Antoninus, repelled the invaders. As the Romans were slow in coming to their defence Uranius assumed power in the region. He issued coins in gold (Figure 13), silver and bronze (Figure 14), but his rule was replaced by the Romans after about a year. The reappearance on his coins of the chariot carrying the

Figure 17 – Bronze coin minted at Emesa. 17 mms diameter. On the obverse the Arabic reads, "No god except Allah alone." On the reverse, it reads, "Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." On the lowest line on the reverse is the name of the mint: Ḥimṣ. (Vcoins: David Tranbarger)

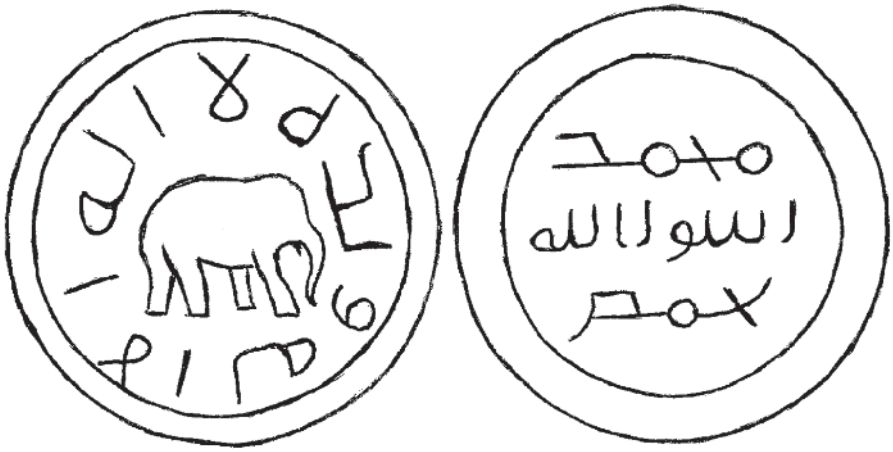


Figure 18 – Diagram of the coin in Figure 2. On the obverse there is an elephant. The Arabic words on the obverse and reverse are the same as on the coin in Figure 17. All the Arabic words on these coins are in the Kufic script.

Figure 19 – Syrian banknote issued in 1997 and again in 2013. It shows Hafez al-Assad, the father of the present president, Bashar al-Assad. Near his right shoulder is a gold dinar from the Umayyad Caliphate (685-750 AD), which was based in Damascus.

stone did not mean that it moved away from the city: it was part of the cult of Elagabal that the stone was carried from one temple to another in Emesa, perhaps to reflect the seasons.

When the Byzantine Empire succeeded the Roman Empire in about 500 AD Emesa became an important Christian centre. During the 3rd century religious thinking in the Roman Empire began to tend towards monotheism, as Michel Prieur explains: "Not only was Christianity part of this trend, but so was the cult of the sun, which expanded with the introduction of Sol Invictus under Gallienus and Aurelian, and became the main cult of the empire." So in the minds of many early Christians Christ was equated with the sun. Eventually, however, the temple of Elagabal was demolished and a church built on the site. What happened to the stone is unknown, but it has been suggested that it became the black stone in the Kaaba in Mecca.

Emesa was not a mint used by the Byzantines. The coins that circulated there were minted mostly at Antioch and Constantinople. (Figure 15) But with the coming of Islam in the 7th century Emesa again began minting coins. The Muslim authorities realized that a sudden change in the coinage might destabilize the economy, and initially they minted coins that looked like the Byzantine ones but with some Arabic phrases. (Figure 16) This Arab-Byzantine coinage was produced at Homs from about 682 to 697 AD, when the caliph 'Abd al-Malik reformed the coinage. The earliest reform types were in gold, silver and bronze and simply showed Arabic sentences. (Figure 17) About the same time Homs minted pictorial types with an elephant (Figure 18) or a jerboa, a type of desert rat; but as Islam forbade images of living creatures these were replaced by the aniconic coinage that persisted in Muslim countries until modern times. Nowadays the coins and banknotes (Figure 19) that circulate in Homs are made elsewhere. Sadly almost nothing exists of ancient Emesa in modern Homs. Even the Byzantine church was replaced by a mosque. Most of the ancient necropolis where the famous 'faced helmet' was discovered in 1936 (Figure 20) was destroyed to make room for a sports ground. Fortunately the coins still exist to tell the story of the city.

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Figure 20 – Silver 'faced helmet' found in the necropolis at Homs. It would have been worn by a high-ranking cavalry officer in the 1st century AD. (Image courtesy of Balkancelts)