

Rare Tetradrachms of Tiberius

by Peter E. Lewis

Marble head of Tiberius in the Louvre (Wikimedia Commons).

THE word ‘tetradrachm’ is a Greek word which means four drachms. A drachm was the unit of silver coinage in ancient Greece and regions under Greek influence, and it was approximately equivalent to the Roman denarius. By the time of the Roman emperor, Tiberius (14-37 AD), tetradrachms were minted only in the eastern part of the Roman Empire where Greek influence was still strong. Actually, under Tiberius only five

cities minted tetradrachms: (1) Tarsus in Cilicia, which was part of the Roman province of Syria at this time. (Figure 1 – map) (2) Antioch, the administrative centre of the province. (3) An uncertain city in northern Syria or Cilicia. (4) Tyre. The city of Tyre minted tetradrachms during the reign of Tiberius but they do not have his name or image on them and they are not rare today. (Figure 2) (5) Alexandria in Egypt. The tetradrachms

of Alexandria (Figure 3) did not circulate outside Egypt. They contained only 30 to 40% silver and must have been minted in large numbers because they are fairly common today.

Tarsus is of particular interest to Christians because it was the home of Saint Paul, who was the apostle to the Gentiles and is often given the credit for the growth of Christianity. The date of his birth is unknown but it would have been about 5 AD. The emperor Augustus (31



Figure 1 – Map drawn by the author to show cities mentioned in the text.



Figure 2 – Tetradrachm of Tyre. These coins were issued by the city of Tyre from 126 BC to the beginning of the Jewish War in 66 AD. The Jews used them to pay the Temple tax. Obverse: head of Heracles (Hercules). Reverse: eagle with Greek legend which means, “of Tyre, holy and (city) of refuge.”

BC-14 AD) minted a tetradrachm at Tarsus. (Figure 4) The coin is undated but the authors of *Roman Provincial Coinage, Volume I* suggest a date of about 5 AD, so Paul probably saw some of these coins. Paul was born a Roman citizen, which means that his father was a Roman citizen. It has been suggested that Paul's father was granted Roman citizenship by one of the Roman generals because he owned a tent-making firm and Roman armies needed tents. As a wealthy businessman in Tarsus he would have handled these tetradrachms of Augustus.

The tetradrachm that Augustus minted at Tarsus was similar to those that he minted at Antioch. (Figure 5) The only differences were the Greek legend on the reverse and the letters and monograms in the fields on the reverse. They both have the laureate head of Augustus on the obverse, and on the reverse Tyche (the city goddess) sits on a rock while the river god swims at her feet. This image was copied from the gilded bronze statue made by the Greek sculptor, Eutyches of Sicyon, early in the 3rd century BC for the city of Antioch. It stood in a portable shrine (Figure 6), and Pausanias, a Roman travel-writer of the 2nd century AD, mentions it in one of his books. There is a Roman marble copy of the statue in the Vatican Museum. (Figure 7) Antioch was the capital of the province and an early centre of Christianity. Jesus was

crucified in Jerusalem in about 30 AD, but his followers were first called Christians in Antioch. Augustus minted tetradrachms there every year from 5 BC to 1 AD and again in 6, 12 and 14 AD.

The tetradrachm that Tiberius minted at Tarsus is extremely rare. (Figure 8) In fact, there are only three known specimens: one in the British Museum, one in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, and one in the collection of St John's Cathedral in Brisbane. The obverse has the laureate head of Tiberius, but the reverse is quite different from all the other tetradrachms. It has Livia, the mother of Tiberius, seated on a throne

holding ears of grain and a poppyhead. According to the legend on the coin, she is Hera, the wife of Zeus, the chief of the gods. Livia was also called Julia, and on the reverse the Greek legend reads: "Julia, Hera, Augusta". The image might have been based on the famous statue of Hera by Polycleitus that was in her temple at Argos in Greece. The authors of *RPC I* suggest that the coin was minted in about 35 AD, but it is unlikely that a coin deifying Livia would have been minted in a major city like Tarsus at that time because Tiberius had become alienated from his mother and forbade her deification when she died in 29 AD. In any case it



Figure 4 – Tetradrachm of Augustus minted at Tarsus. Obverse: head of Augustus. Reverse: Tyche seated, holding palm branch, with river god below. Monogram of TAP (for Tarsus) in right field. *RPC I* 4004.



Figure 3 – Tetradrachm of Tiberius minted at Alexandria. Obverse: laureate head of Tiberius. Under his chin are the Greek letters for 14 (= 27/28 AD). The Greek legend reads: "Tiberius Caesar Augustus." Reverse: radiate head of Augustus. The Greek legend reads: "God (or Divine) Augustus." *RPC I* 5091.



Figure 5 – Tetradrachm of Augustus minted at Antioch. Obverse: head of Augustus. Reverse: Tyche seated, holding palm branch, with river god below. The Greek legend reads: "of the year of victory 26." The victory was at Actium in 31 BC, so the date is 5 BC. Above the river god is a monogram for Antioch. *RPC I* 4151.



Figure 6 – Bronze coin of Trebonianus Gallus (251-3 AD) minted at Antioch. Diameter 28 mms. Reverse: statue of Tyche in a portable shrine. The carry-bars are clearly shown. The ram jumping over the shrine is probably the sign of the Zodiac (Aries) under which Antioch was founded. The letters ΔΕ probably mean "of the 4 eparchies," an eparchy being a subdivision of the province. McAlee 1181.



Figure 7 – Roman marble copy of the Tyche of Antioch in the Vatican Museum. (Wikimedia Commons)

is likely that Paul saw this tetradrachm of Tiberius because after his conversion on the road to Damascus in about 36 AD he lived in Tarsus from about 38 to 45 AD. Tiberius minted two tetradrachms at



Figure 8 – Tetradrachm of Tiberius minted at Tarsus. Obverse: head of Tiberius. Reverse: Livia enthroned as Hera. RPC I 4005.

Antioch, both of which are rare. One is definitely from Antioch because on the reverse it has the Greek legend: “of the people of Antioch, Metropolis”, (Figure 9), but there is some doubt about the other because a city is not named on it. (Figure 10) Michel Prieur, the co-author of *The Syro-Phoenician Tetradrachms and their Fractions from 57 BC to AD 253*, feels strongly that it was minted at Antioch, the capital of the province. As the coins minted there were intended to circulate throughout the province, there was no need to name it. The authors of *RPC I* also attribute the coin to Antioch, but Richard McAlee, the author of *The Coins of Roman Antioch*, considers that it was

struck in Tarsus, while Kevin Butcher, the author of *Coinage in Roman Syria: Northern Syria, 64 BC-AD 253*, assigns it to an uncertain mint in Cilicia or northern Syria.

Concerning the Tiberian tetradrachm definitely from Antioch, it has the same reverse as the tetradrachms minted there by Augustus, and in the field on the reverse there are the Greek letters, ΔΠ, for 84. This was the number of years since 49/8 BC when Julius Caesar defeated Pompey at the Battle of Pharsalis and became ruler of the Roman world, and therefore the coin was struck in 35/6 AD. Because Tiberius died in 37 AD the tetradrachm without a city name or date must

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Figure 9 – Tetrachm of Tiberius minted at Antioch. Obverse: head of Tiberius. Reverse: Tyche seated, holding palm branch, with river god below. There are six known examples of this coin. Four have ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΕΩΣ (genitive plural of 'metropolis') but on the other two the engravers ran out of room and the word ends with ΕΩ or ΙC, as on this coin. It is probably unique. RPC I 4162.

have been minted at some time between 14 and 35 AD. Today there are 8 known specimens of this coin, two of which are in the collection of St John's Cathedral in Brisbane. The 8 coins were struck from 4 obverse dies and 4 reverse dies. As the styles of the images on the dies are different, the coins could have been minted at different times during this period.

In addition to the tetrachms already mentioned there are what are known as 'Zeus tetrachms'. They have the emperor's head on the obverse and Zeus seated on the reverse. Tiberius issued two of these coins: one with the initials of three officials in the right field on the reverse (Figure 11) and one with a monogram that looks like M in the left field and H in the right field. (Figure 12) These coins also have no city name or date on



Figure 11 – Zeus tetrachm of Tiberius. Obverse: head of Tiberius. Reverse: Zeus seated holding Nike (Victory) on his right hand. In the right field are the three initials of three officials. RPC I 4109.



Figure 10 – Tetrachm of Tiberius probably minted at Antioch. Obverse: laureate head of Tiberius with a Greek legend meaning, "Tiberius Augustus Caesar." Reverse: head of Augustus wearing a radiate crown signifying his deification. The Greek legend, ΘΕΟΣ ΣΕΒΑΣΤΟΣ ΚΑΙΣΑΡ, means "God (or Divine) Augustus Caesar." The portraits on the obverse and reverse are almost identical. RPC I 4161.



Figure 12 – Zeus tetrachm of Tiberius. Obverse: head of Tiberius. Reverse: Zeus seated holding Nike (Victory) on his right hand. In the left field is a monogram that looks like M. In the right field is a monogram that looks like H. There are only three known examples. RPC I 4110.

them. Prieur believes they were minted at a secondary mint in Antioch. The authors of *RPC I* suggest that they came from Cilicia. McAlee thinks they came from Tarsus, while Butcher says that a city in northern Syria is just as likely as one in Cilicia.

What is really exciting about the tetrachms that have the name and image of Tiberius on them is that one of them could have been held by Jesus himself. In his gospel Mark recounts an incident that occurred in Jerusalem when some Jews ask Jesus whether they should pay tax to the Romans. He says, "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." (Figure 13) He then asks whose image and inscription are on the coin. When they answer, "Caesar's", he says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God

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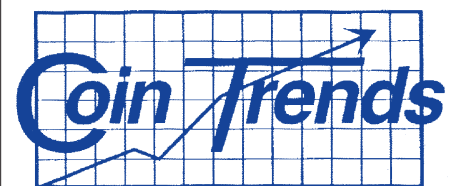
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Figure 13 – Detail from 1752 copper-plate engraving showing the scene described in Mark 12:13-17 and parallels when Jesus is shown a coin. (Author's collection)



Figure 14 – A Roman road excavated in Tarsus. St Paul might have walked on this road. Notice how far it is below the present level of the city. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 15 – Courtyard in the Archaeological Museum at Antakya (ancient Antioch). Broken columns and capitals from ancient buildings are in the foreground. (Wikimedia Commons)

what is God's." It seems, however, that Roman denarii, which were minted at Lugdunum in Gaul, did not circulate in Judaea at this time, and Richard Abdy (Curator of Roman Coins in the British Museum) and Amelia Dowler (Curator of Greek Coins) state in their book, *Coins and the Bible* that it is unlikely that the coin brought to Jesus was a denarius. In the Gospel of Thomas there is a different account of the incident: some Jews show a coin to Jesus and then ask whether they should pay tax to the Romans. So there must have been something special about the coin. When all the silver coins that circulated in the province of Syria at the time are considered the most likely coin is the tetradrachm (Figure 10) which names Augustus as God or Divine (ΘΕΟΣ). This coin would have offended the Jews because it shows a human being, albeit a deceased emperor, with the claim that he is divine. A similar situation arose at a later time when the claim that Jesus, a deceased human being, was divine, offended many Jews.

Archaeology is unlikely to assist in answering these questions because the remains of the ancient cities of Tarsus (Figure 14) and Antioch (Figure 15) are several metres below the levels of the modern Turkish cities of Tarsus and Antakya. The cities were built on flood plains, and centuries of silt have buried them. The coins, therefore, are very significant in considering these matters, which have important ramifications affecting us all. Whether a literal understanding of religious texts is appropriate in the modern world, is one of the questions that requires an answer.

Note

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