

The Coins of Tarsus

Part 1 The Persian Period

by Peter E. Lewis



Figure 1 – Map showing some of the cities visited by St Paul.

THE city of Tarsus (**Figure 1 – Map**) is important for several reasons, and as coins were minted there from the fifth century BC to the 3rd century AD it is of considerable interest to numismatists. It is historically important firstly because there has been a settlement there for thousands of years and secondly because it was the home-town of Saint Paul, arguably the most important person in Christianity after Jesus Christ himself.

Tarsus is situated on a plain south of a range of snow-capped mountains called the Taurus Mountains in ancient times. Several rivers flow down from the mountains across the plain. (**Figure 2 – Map**) The Cydnus River actually flowed through the city until the Byzantine emperor Justinian I (527 – 565 AD) moved the main course of the river to

the east to prevent flooding in the city. The region that included the plain and the mountainous region to the west was called Cilicia.

Tarsus was about 20 kilometres from the coast, but south of the city the Cydnus River flowed into a lake which served as a harbour for Tarsus. Eventually the harbour silted up and became a swamp. The road north from Tarsus traversed the mountains at a narrow pass called the Cilician Gates. Trade from Syria to the important Greek cities on the coast of the Aegean Sea went through this pass. At the same time the influence of Greek civilization extended eastwards along this road and was felt particularly at Tarsus, which became a melting pot of cultures from the East and the West.

Cilicia was part of the Hittite Empire, and Tarsus is mentioned in Hittite texts.

The Hittite Empire existed from about 1800 to 1200 BC when it was overrun by large migrations of people that included the Sea People. The Sea People were groups of aggressive seafarers who invaded the land around the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea. Following the collapse of the Hittite Empire independent kingdoms arose in Anatolia and Cilicia, but with the rise of the Assyrian Empire in the 9th century Tarsus came under Assyrian influence. Similarly after the Persian king Cyrus I came into power in 547 BC Tarsus continued under Persian control until Alexander the Great defeated the Persians in 333 BC.

The first coins were minted at Tarsus in about 450 BC during the Persian Period. Although under Persian control at this time Tarsus was ruled by a dynasty of native kings, but from about 400 BC the Persians exerted more direct rule through governors (satraps). During the period 450 – 400 BC the dynasty that ruled Tarsus used the name 'Syennesis' as a title and a variety of coins was minted at Tarsus. As the ruler and date are not indicated on the coins it is not possible to be certain which king was responsible but the coins usually bear the name 'Tarsus' in Aramaic (**Figure 3**). A silver stater with a horse and rider on the obverse and a soldier on the reverse has been attributed to Syennesis III who was king of Cilicia from about 420 to 400 BC. (**Figure 4**) The soldier wears a Corinthian helmet and holds a shield with

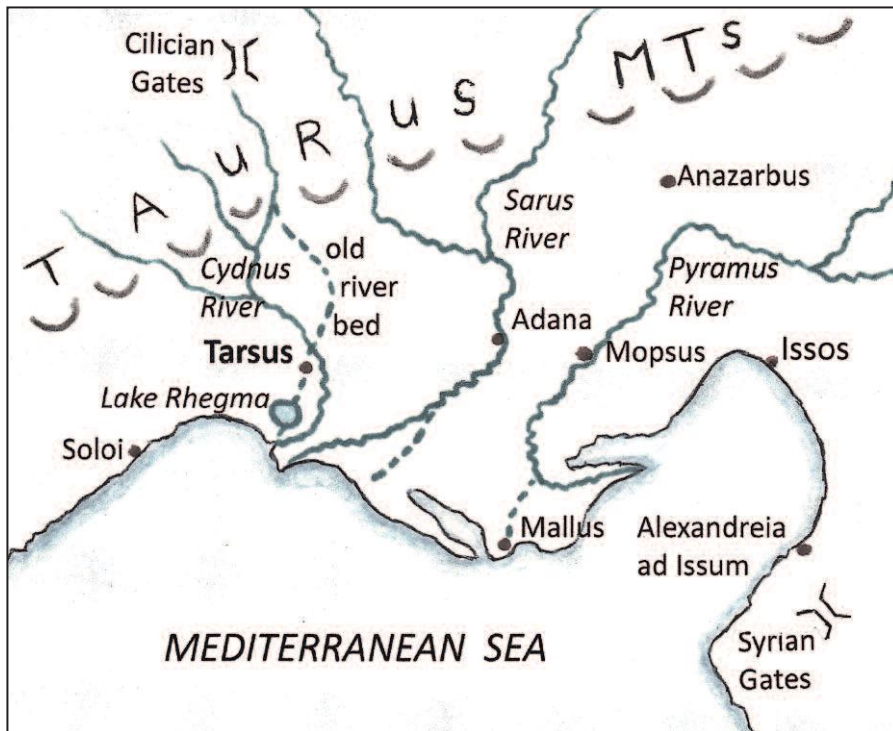


Figure 2 – Map of Cilicia, based on the maps in 'The Cities of St Paul' by Sir William Ramsay.

the gorgoneion (head of Medusa) on it. The helmet and the Medusa indicate that he is a Greek soldier, perhaps a mercenary, and the coins might have been used to pay Greek mercenaries. Other coins minted at Tarsus during this period show a Persian archer (Figure 5), the city walls (Figure 6) and the god Nergal (Figure 7). We know it is Nergal because his name in Aramaic appears on the coin. He was the Mesopotamian god of war, and he has a spear and a bow with a lion's skin hanging over his back. He was equated with the Phoenician god, Melqart, and the Greek god, Heracles (Hercules), who also had a lion's skin. Nergal was also a god of vegetation,

which explains the sacred tree behind him on the coin. Both Nergal and the horseman on the obverse hold a lotus flower. The numismatists at Roma Numismatics explain the significance of the flower: "The lotus appears only sporadically in Greek and near-Eastern mythology, though it has a well attested use in Egyptian art and legend, where it was taken as a symbolic representation of the sun on account of its physical behaviour: it closes at night time and descends into the water, rising and flowering again at dawn, thus also becoming by extension a symbol of the eternal cycle of death and rebirth."

There is a very interesting coin in this horseman series. On the reverse it shows a Persian and a Greek soldier (Figure 8) but what the scene represents is unknown. Is the Persian helping



Figure 4 – Silver stater of Tarsus probably issued by Syennesis III, circa 425 – 400 BC. The Aramaic letters for TRZ (Tarsus) appear in the upper right of the reverse. (Dr Busso Peus Nachfolger, Auction 409, Lot 154)

a wounded Greek or is he about to kill him? Perhaps he is lifting the head of the Greek to give him a drink from a bowl in his right hand. All the coins from this period, 450 – 400 BC, are very rare.

After 400 BC when Tarsus was ruled by Persian satraps the names of various Persian generals appear on the coins of Tarsus. The first is Tiribazos. He was the satrap of Lydia but in 386 he was put in charge of a war against the king of Salamis in Cyprus and to raise money for the campaign silver staters were minted at several Cilician towns including

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 Z R T
 = TARZ
 = Greek ΤΑΡΣΟΣ
 = Latin TARSUS

Figure 3 – The name, Tarsus, in Aramaic. Aramaic is read from right to left and vowels are not shown.



Figure 5 – Silver stater of Tarsus from the period 420 – 400. There is a horseman, probably Syennesis III, on the obverse and a Persian archer on the reverse with a monogram behind. (Dr Busso Peus Nachfolger, Auction 31, Lot 201)



Figure 6 – Silver stater of Tarsus from the period circa 455 – 400 showing the walls of the city and the forepart of a bull. Below the bull is the same monogram as on the coin in Figure 5. (Roma Numismatics, Auction 16, Lot 326)

Tarsus. On one stater the standing figure could be either Zeus, the chief god of the Greeks, or Ba'al, the chief god of the Syrians and Phoenicians. The Aramaic word, Ba'al, just means 'Lord'. On the reverse the Persian god, Ahura Mazda,

appears as a man rising from a solar disc with wings and tail feathers. (Figure 9) Religions from the East and the West are represented on this coin which was apparently intended to appeal to soldiers from all over the Persian Empire. Another coin of Tiribazos shows Athena, the Greek warrior-goddess, on

the obverse, and on the reverse there a woman kneeling down to toss astragaloi (knuckle bones) which were used like dice. (Figure 10) It would have appealed to the Greek soldiers.

In 379 BC the Persian general Pharnabazos was given the task of reconquering Egypt for the Persians, and again coins were minted at Tarsus to finance



Figure 7 – Silver stater of Tarsus from the period 440 – 400 showing a horseman on the obverse and the god Nergal on the reverse. (Roma Numismatics, Auction 16, Lot 330)



Figure 8 – Silver stater of Tarsus from the period circa 450 – 400 showing a horseman on the obverse. On the reverse there is a Persian soldier with a bow and quiver behind his shoulder and a Greek soldier wearing a crested Greek helmet. (Roma Numismatics, Auction 16, Lot 325)



Figure 9 – Silver stater of Tiribazos, satrap of Lydia (388 – 380), minted at Tarsus from 386. Obverse: Zeus or Ba'al holds an eagle. The Aramaic word to the right is Tiribazos. Reverse: Ahura Mazda holds a wreath and a lotus flower. (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 66, Lot 601. Website: cngcoins.com)



Figure 10 – Silver stater of Tiribazos minted at Tarsus. Obverse: Athena. Reverse: woman tossing astragaloi (off flan). There is a lotus flower on the right. (Roma Numismatics, Electronic Auction 18, Lot 445)



Figure 11 – Tetradrachm minted at Syracuse in 405-400 BC and signed by Kimon on Arethusa's headband. (Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 27, Lot 118).



Figure 12 – Silver stater of Pharnabazos minted at Tarsus from 379. Obverse: head of Arethusa. Reverse: helmeted head with the name Pharnabazos in Aramaic. (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton V Auction, Lot 1473)



Figure 13 – Silver stater of Pharnabazos minted at Tarsus from 379. Obverse: Ba'al enthroned with BLTRZ in Aramaic letters meaning Ba'al Tarz (Lord of Tarsus). Reverse: helmeted head with Aramaic letters PRNBZW (Pharnabazos) and HLK (Khilik = Cilicia). (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton V Auction, Lot 1472)

the operation. Pharnabazos was the satrap of a region in north-western Anatolia, and the coins would have appealed to Greek mercenaries because on the obverse was the head of the nymph Arethusa, a figure in Greek mythology. It had been copied from a coin minted at Syracuse in Sicily and engraved by Kimon whose work was much admired and copied in other cities. (Figure 11) On the reverse of the coin of Pharnabazos (Figure 12) there is the helmeted head of a bearded soldier with the name Pharnabazos in Aramaic, and one would assume that he was the person depicted, but as the same head appears on other coins it is often suggested that it is Ares, the Greek god of war. Another coin of Pharnabazos has the same reverse but on the obverse there is the Ba'al of Tarsus seated on a throne and holding a sceptre with a lotus flower on the top. (Figure 13)

In 378 another Persian general, Datames, was appointed to assist Pharnabazos in his task of reconquering Egypt. Datames was the satrap of Cappadocia, the region north of the Taurus Mountains. He also minted coins at Tarsus, but when Pharnabazos died in 374 he was given sole command of the Egyptian campaign. One of his coins has the Ba'al of Tarsus on the obverse but he is holding a bunch of grapes and an ear of corn, a



Figure 14 – Silver stater of Datames minted at Tarsus from 378. Obverse: Ba'al of Tarsus enthroned with the forepart of a bull (cf. Figure 6) below the throne. There is an incense burner in the background. The crenelated border represents the battlements of the city. Reverse: Datames seated. (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 64, Lot 338)



Figure 15 – Silver stater of Datames minted at Tarsus from 378. Obverse: Ba'al of Tarsus. Reverse: Ana on the left points to Datames. There is an incense burner between them. The Aramaic letters are ANA to the left and TRKMW to the right. (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton V Auction, Lot 1474)

reference to his being a god of vegetation and fertility. On the reverse there is a seated man examining an arrow, and as he is wearing the headdress and clothes of a Persian satrap he is probably Datames himself. Above him is the symbol of Ahura Mazda, and to the left are the Aramaic letters for TRKMW (Tarkumuwa, another name of Datames). (Figure 14) Another coin of Datames has the same obverse but on the reverse the Persian sky god, Ana, points to Datames who points to himself apparently as a gesture of veneration. (Figure 15) On an obol issued during the period 380-360

Heracles appears on the obverse with Aphrodite on the reverse. (Figure 16) Heracles was a superhero very popular with the Greeks as was the sexy Aphrodite (Venus).

The next satrap to mint coins at Tarsus was Mazaios. He ruled Cilicia from 361 to just before Alexander the Great invaded the region in 333 and he minted several coins at Tarsus. They have the Ba'al of Tarsus on the obverse and usually a lion on the reverse. (Figure 17) On one coin the lion is attacking a bull above two parallel rows of walls and there is a long inscription in Aramaic which



Figure 16 – Silver obol issued during the period 380-360. Diameter 10 mms. On the obverse the young head of Heracles has lion's paws tied around the neck. This obverse is usually incorrectly described as a female head. On the reverse Aphrodite wears a necklace, earrings and a sexy dress. (Fritz Rudolf Künker Auction 97, Lot 889).

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means “Mazaios, Governor of Transeuphrates (Beyond the River) and Cilicia.” (Figure 18) “Beyond the River” was the official Persian name for the district between the Euphrates River and the Mediterranean Sea, and it included Yehud (Judaea) with its capital, Jerusalem. From 351 Mazaios was not only governor of Cilicia but also of the region that included Jerusalem. David Hendin, in the 4th edition of his *Guide to Biblical Coins* suggested that the walls on Mazaios’ coin were the newly rebuilt

walls of Jerusalem. Because the walls are in parallel Sir William Ramsey thought they represented the Syrian Gates (the mountain pass between Syria and Cilicia). As the walls look like the walls on the coin in Figure 6 they might just be the walls of Tarsus, which was Mazaios’ administrative capital.

In 334 Mazaios was appointed governor of Babylon, and Arsames was appointed governor of Cilicia. At the time the Persian Empire included most of what is today Turkey and extended eastwards

to the border with India. In 333 Alexander the Great defeated the Persian army near Issos in the eastern part of Cilicia and progressed down to Egypt. Eventually he conquered the whole of the Persian Empire, but when he arrived at Tarsus he bathed in the cold water of the Cydnus River and subsequently became very ill with a fever and almost died. What caused the illness is unknown but if he had died the history of the world would have been very different.

Arsames issued no coins that can be attributed to him, and the coin attributed to him by David Sear in *Greek Coins and their Values* (Coin 5653) should be attributed to Balakros, who was the son of one of Alexander’s bodyguards. Alexander appointed Balakros governor of Cilicia with the task of subduing the whole of Asia Minor. Balakros minted several coins at cities in Cilicia including Tarsus. One of them is similar to the coin of Mazaios in Figure 16, but there is, of course, no mention of Transeuphrates, and in the upper field there is the club of Heracles. (Figure 19) Heracles was a favourite god of the Greeks. Alexander’s family in Macedonia claimed to be descended from him, and Alexander thought of himself as a reincarnation of Heracles.

Another coin of Balakros is very Greek. It has the Ba’al of Tarsus on the obverse with the usual grapes and grain but in the right field there is an ivy leaf. (Figure



Figure 17 – Silver stater of Mazaios minted at Tarsus from 361 to 334. Obverse: Ba’al of Tarsus sits holding a lotus-tipped sceptre. Reverse: Lion with MZDY in Aramaic. (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton XVIII Auction, Lot 83)



Figure 18 – Silver stater of Mazaios minted at Tarsus from 361 to 334. Obverse: Ba’al of Tarsus sits holding an eagle-tipped sceptre. To the left there are an ear of grain and a bunch of grapes. Below the throne is the Aramaic letter for M. Reverse: A lion attacks a bull above walls, and there is a long Aramaic inscription. (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton XVIII Auction, Lot 81)



Figure 19 – Silver stater of Balakros, governor of Cilicia from 333 to 328, minted at Tarsus. Obverse: Ba’al of Tarsus. Reverse: club of Heracles above lion attacking bull with city walls below. (Fritz Rudolf Künker Auction 94, Lot 1358)



Figure 20 – Silver stater of Balakros minted at Tarsus. Obverse: a god sits holding a lotus-tipped sceptre with grapes and an ear of grain to the left. To the right there is an ivy leaf and B. Reverse: facing bust of Athena. (Gorny & Mosch Auction 159, Lot 237)



Figure 21 – A coin like that in Figure 20 but the B has been erased. On this coin it is still faintly visible. (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton VI Auction, Lot 440)



Figure 22 – Silver stater of Balakros minted at Tarsus. Obverse: Dionysus sits enthroned with a bunch of grapes to the left and the Greek word ΒΑΛΑΚΡΟΥ (of Balakros) to the right. Below the throne is the letter T for Tarsus. Reverse: facing bust of Athena. (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 148, Lot 202)



Figure 23 – Tetradrachm of Alexander the Great minted at Tarsus from 327 to 323 BC. Obverse: head of Heracles. Reverse: Zeus enthroned. Price 3018b. (Author's Collection)

20) As ivy was a symbol of the Greek god Dionysus it seems that Balakros is equating the god on the coin with Dionysus. Above the leaf the B stands for Balakros, and below the throne the T stands for Tarsus. On the reverse Athena wears a triple-crested helmet.

Other similar coins have a peculiar feature: the B for Balakros has been erased. (Figure 21) According to the Classical Numismatic Group numismatists this was done deliberately. In 328 Balakros was killed fighting the Pisidians in a region north-west of Cilicia, but this would not warrant the B being erased from the dies used to strike these coins.

The solution to this mystery is probably provided by another coin of Balakros which flagrantly shows his full name on the obverse. (Figure 22) On the coin there is no mention of Alexander who was at the time in some remote part of Asia. There is not even the club of Heracles. So it seems that Balakros was going to create a kingdom for himself with Dionysus as his patron god.

Subsequently Tarsus became a major mint for tetradrachms in the name of Alexander. They were minted in many cities and they all look the same except for the mint symbol, which for Tarsus was a plough. (Figure 23) On the obverse

there is the head of Heracles wearing a lion's head headdress with the lion's paws tied around his neck. On the reverse Zeus sits enthroned with the Greek word ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ (of Alexander) to the right. Zeus holds an eagle, which is his symbol, so there is no doubt which god is shown. Being a sky god, an eagle was a fitting attribute for him. These coins were issued for many years after Alexander died in 323. The Greek warrior goddess, Athena, reappears on gold coins of Alexander (Figure 24) but this time she is in profile, like Ares on the earlier Persian coins. The story of the amazing coins of Tarsus will be continued in Part 2.



Figure 24 – Gold stater of Alexander the Great minted at Tarsus from about 333 to 327 BC. Obverse: Athena wears a Corinthian helmet. Reverse: Nike (Victory) holds a wreath. (Gemini Auction V, Lot 386).

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