

The Coins of Tarsus

Part 3 The Roman Period

by Peter E. Lewis



IN 63 BC the Roman general Pompey made Cilicia a Roman province with Tarsus as its capital. (Figure 1 – map) He had been sent by the Roman senate to deal with Mithradates VI, the king of Pontus, who attempted to extend his rule over Asia Minor. After defeating Mithradates Pompey progressed through Cilicia to Syria which he also made a Roman province with Antioch as its capital. From 51 to 50 BC the famous Roman orator, Cicero, resided in Tarsus as the governor of the province, and in 47 BC Julius Caesar visited the city. In 41 BC the fateful meeting of Mark Antony and Cleopatra occurred at Tarsus. Cleo-

patra wanted to impress Antony and when her luxurious perfumed barge was rowed up the Cydnus River she was arrayed as the goddess Venus. Antony quickly succumbed to her charms. In the movie *Cleopatra* the role of Cleopatra was played by Elizabeth Taylor. (Figure 2) Although some undated bronze coins might have been minted at Tarsus its mint was probably inactive during this period.

Subsequently Cilicia was incorporated into the province of Syria and Antioch became the chief mint for the region. Coins were not minted at Tarsus until the reign of the Roman emperor Augustus

(31BC-14 AD) and then only in limited numbers. There was a tetradrachm with Augustus on the obverse and Tyche, the city goddess, seated on the reverse with the river god swimming at her feet. (Figure 3) This image of Tyche had been copied from a famous statue in Antioch that showed her sitting on a mountain (Mt Silpius), but as there was no mountain close to Tarsus she is sitting on a throne with its front leg like an animal's leg.

It was during the reign of Augustus that a man generally known as Paul of Tarsus (or Saint Paul) was born in Tarsus probably in about 5 AD. He played a

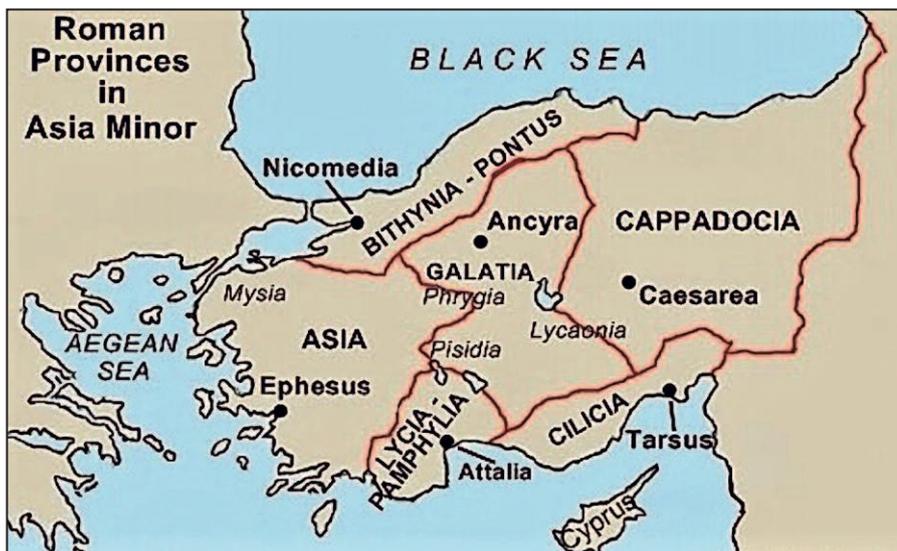


Figure 1 – Map showing the Roman provinces. (Image courtesy of BibleStudy.org)



Figure 2 – Elizabeth Taylor played the role of Cleopatra in the movie. (Wikimedia Commons)

major role in spreading Christianity because he travelled widely in Asia Minor and Greece and he focused on converting gentiles. His image appears on many modern medals but my favourite is a large French medal which captures something of his determination. (Figure 4) His actual appearance is unknown, but in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, which was written in the second century AD, he is described as having a bald head and a hooked nose, and both of these features appear on the medal where the rays of light refer to his conversion (Acts 9:3) and the halo above his bald patch refers to his saintliness. In his right hand he grasps some of his letters.

Because Tarsus was built on a flood plain the city that Paul knew is buried several metres below the modern city which has a population of about 150,000, but in 1993 when a site was being excavated for underground parking an ancient street was discovered with the remains of houses, shops and public buildings. (Figures 5 and 6) Paul probably walked on this street.

Augustus was succeeded by Tiberius (14-37 AD) and it was during his reign that Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem, probably in 30 AD. Under Tiberius the monogram of Tarsus appears on only one extremely rare tetradrachm. (Figure 7) It has his mother Livia, named as the goddess Hera, on the reverse. He hated his mother and did not attend her funeral.

There are some bronze coins which were minted at Tarsus probably during the reign of Tiberius but the date and emperor are not shown on them. (Figure 8) On the reverse they have the names of magistrates in the fields, and this feature appears on tetradrachms which have the head of Tiberius on the obverse but no indication of the mint. (Figure 9) These coins are important because if they were minted during the reign of Tiberius it is likely that Paul would have handled them. If the coin is very worn as in Figure 10 then the chances of it being in the saint's possession at some time are greatly increased. He was a tent-maker and he would have handled coins often.

Apart from some rare tetradrachms of Claudius (41-54 AD) which have Zeus on the reverse and might have been minted at Tarsus, no other coins were minted there until after 72 AD when Cilicia became a separate province with Tarsus as its capital. Under the Roman emperor Domitian (81-96 AD) tetradrachms with Tyche seated on rocks were minted in the city (Figure 11) and probably some undated bronze coins with Tyche on the obverse and Zeus on the reverse. Similar tetradrachms were minted by Trajan (98-117 AD).

Under Hadrian (117-138 AD) Tarsus



Figure 3 – Tetradrachm of Augustus. Diameter 25 mms. The inscription on the reverse means “of the metropolis”. There is a monogram of TAP for Tarsus in the right field. (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 356, Lot 320. Website www.cngcoins.com)



Figure 4 – Bronze medal of the Mint of Paris with an image of St Paul probably by Annette Landy and struck in 1960. Diameter 59 mms. (Author's Collection)



Figure 5 – Roman road excavated in the centre of Tarsus. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 6 – Roman houses excavated in the centre of Tarsus. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 7 – Tetradrachm of Tiberius. Diameter 27 mms. As the goddess Hera, Livia (Julia) holds two ears of grain and a poppy head. The inscription means "of the Augusta Julia Hera." (Collection of St John's Cathedral, Brisbane)



Figure 8 – Bronze coin of Tarsus probably minted under Tiberius. Diameter 21 mms. On the obverse Tyche sits on a throne. Behind her is the magistrate's Greek name OPTVTOΘHPA (Ortugothera) which means 'quail-hunting'. On the reverse Zeus holds Nike on his hand. Magistrates' names are in the left field. (Classical Numismatic Group, Auction 88, Lot 1000)



Figure 9 – Tetradrachm of Tiberius probably minted at Tarsus. On the reverse there are magistrates' names behind Zeus. (Collection of St John's Cathedral, Brisbane)

became a major mint, and tridrachms with a variety of reverses were issued. The local god, Sandan, reappears on some of Hadrian's coins. (Figure 12) From Hadrian to Gallienus (253-268 AD) Tarsus regularly issued bronze and occasionally silver coins. The reverse types mostly reflect Greco-Roman mythology and religion. Heracles (known as Hercules to the Romans) was a popular superhero and he appears frequently on the coins performing one of his Twelve Labours. Presumably he reflected the valour of the emperor and his military forces.

On a coin of Caracalla (198-217 AD) Heracles is fighting Antaeus (Greek: Antaios) who was the son of Poseidon (god of the sea) and Gaia (Earth). This incident occurred during his Eleventh Labour when he was sent by Eurystheus, the king of Tiryns in Greece, to fetch the golden apples of the Hesperides who were the daughters of Atlas. The apples grew on a tree that was guarded by a serpent. After killing the serpent and getting the apples (Figure 13) Heracles was returning to Greece when he was challenged by Antaeus. He was a belligerent fellow who liked to wrestle with men and kill them. He always won because whenever his body came in contact with the earth his strength was restored. When they began to wrestle, Heracles wondered why Antaeus would throw



Figure 10 – Very worn bronze coin of Tarsus. Diameter 27 mms. Tyche holds a large ear of grain. Zeus holds Nike and below is the name of the magistrate ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝΙΔΗΣ (Apollonides). Paul would have known of him. Behind Zeus is ΤΑΡΣΕΩΝ (of the Tarsians). (Author's Collection)

himself down on the ground before jumping up again. When Heracles realized what was happening he grabbed Antaeus around the waist and held him up so that his feet could not touch the ground. Then he squeezed him so hard that he died. On the coin (Figure 14) Heracles is holding up Antaeus who is struggling to touch the ground with his feet. It became a popular subject in painting (Figure 15) and sculpture (Figure 16).

Tarsus prospered during the 2nd and 3rd centuries. It was a university city noted for its intellectual life especially for Stoic philosophy. The philosopher Athenodorus, who was the advisor of Augustus, came from Tarsus and died there in 7 AD. Architecturally it must have been impressive with temples and public buildings, and several coins show a large temple with ten columns in its façade. (Figure 17) It was an important centre in the Roman Empire and when there was a shortage of grain Caracalla arranged for a shipment to be sent from Alexandria in Egypt. (Figure 18)

The whole of Cilicia prospered during the Roman period and Tarsus had to compete with the other cities in the province such as Adana and Anazarbus. On the coins of Tarsus the word ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΙΣ (metropolis = mother city) usually appears, often with the letters AMK, which stand for Greek words



Figure 11 – Tetradrachm of Domitian. Diameter 26 mms. (Classical Numismatic Group, Auction 90, Lot 1082)



Figure 12 – Tridrachm of Hadrian. Diameter 25 mms. Sandan stands on a mythical beast (a lion with horns and wings) and holds a garland and a double-headed axe in his left hand. (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 64, Lot 689)

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meaning 'first, greatest, most beautiful.' (Figure 19) But AMK and 'metropolis' also appear on coins of Anazarbus.

During the reign of Trajan Decius

(149-151 AD) a series of amusing coins was minted at Tarsus. They have Herennia Estruscilla, the wife of Decius, on the obverse, and Dionysus, the god of

wine and revelry, on the reverse. On the first (Figure 20) Dionysus is probably DRUNK because he holds a cantharus (a large wine cup) but he stands with his



Figure 16 – Statue of Hercules and Antaeus on the fountain at the Medici Villa of Castello, Florence, 16th century. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by cyberuly)



Figure 17 – Bronze coin of Commodus (177-192 AD). Diameter 34 mms. Below the temple the Greek words mean "Twice temple-guardians (of the imperial cult)" and the word "Commodeian" on the temple suggests that Commodus actually visited the city. (Nomos Auction 6, Lot 157).



Figure 18 – Bronze coin of Caracalla (198-217 AD). Diameter 33 mms. The galley is carrying wheat to Tarsus. The rudder is clearly shown at the stern of the ship, and the shape of the sail indicates that it is going backwards! (Dr Busso Peus Nachfolger, Auction 366, Lot 1005)



Figure 19 – Bronze coin of Gordian III (238-244 AD). Diameter 36 mms. Tyche, the city goddess, holds a cornucopia and a rudder on a globe. The letters AMK are prominent. (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 192, Lot 126)

garment around his waist and a panther by his side. On the second (**Figure 21**) he is VERY DRUNK and his garment has fallen down exposing his genitals. On the third (**Figure 22**) he is LEGLESS leaning on a satyr and his garment has fallen down even further. Little is known about Herennia Etruscilla but if she had actually approved of these coins she must have been a real 'party girl'.

During the reign of Valerian (253-260 AD) a series of events weakened the eastern half of the Roman Empire. There were Gothic invasions in Asia Minor and Persian invasions of Syria. Valerian moved to counter the Persian threat but

when he foolishly agreed to meet with the Persian king, Shapur I, he was captured and later died in Persia. During the period of confusion that followed most of the mints were closed permanently, including the mint at Tarsus.

The last coins minted at Tarsus were bronze coins of Gallienus (253-268 AD) who was Valerian's son. (**Figures 23 and 24**) Although Roman Provincial Coinage came to an end a sufficient number of coins had been issued to give us a fascinating insight into the ancient world before Christianity became dominant.

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Figure 20 – Bronze coin with Herennia Etruscilla on the obverse. Diameter 28 mms. On the reverse Dionysus stands with his garment around his waist. (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 266, Lot 271)



Figure 21 – Bronze coin with Herennia Etruscilla on the obverse. Diameter 28 mms. On the reverse Dionysus stands with his genitals exposed. (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 352, Lot 338)



Figure 23 – Bronze coin of Gallienus (253-268 AD). Diameter 32 mms. Artemis the huntress is pulling an arrow out of a quiver on her back. (Roma Numismatics, May 2013 Auction, Lot 1043)



Figure 22 – Bronze coin with Herennia Etruscilla on the obverse. Diameter 31 mms. On the reverse Dionysus stands with his garment below his knees. He would fall over without the support of the satyr on whom he leans. (Numismatik Naumann, Auction 32, Lot 350)

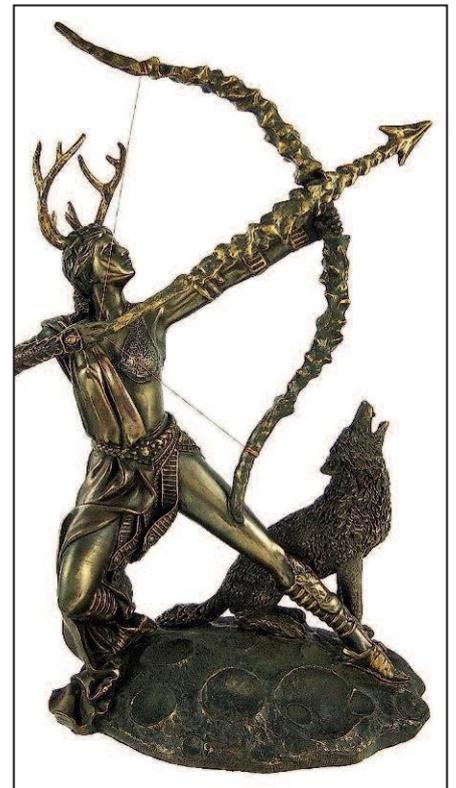


Figure 24 – Modern sculpture of Artemis the huntress and moon-goddess. She is standing on the moon and shooting flaming arrows of light at the earth while a wolf howls in the night. Her flaming bow is the shape of the crescent moon. (Author's Collection)