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NEW OUTLOOK*

Proceedings of the ICOMON meetings held in: Stavanger, Norway, 1995, Vienna, Austria, 1996 / Memoria de las reuniones de ICOMON celebradas en: Stavanger, Noruega, 1995, Viena, Austria, 1996

[Madrid] : Museo Casa de la Moneda, [1997]
269 p. – ISBN 84-88298-03-X., pp. 124-127

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The Israel Museum Jerusalem

Since they were introduced some 2,600 years ago, coins have become an integral part of daily life, reflecting in their own way some of humanity's deepest aspirations. From generation to generation, kings, rulers, cities, and states have issued countless numbers of coins, which offer a wealth of insights into the actions of individuals and societies. Although diminutive in size, coins are significant historical documents. Their symbols and inscriptions make it possible to retrace the unwritten history of states and cities and to confirm obscure accounts from other sources. Most important, because coins constitute direct physical evidence of a period, they have a certain advantage over information from literary sources - especially since ancient historians often copied their material from other writers, and most did not actually witness the events they wrote about. If we succeed in deciphering the language of coins, their vocabulary of symbols and abbreviated inscriptions, we uncover a veritable treasure trove of information about the societies that minted them.

In 1969, the Israel Museum decided to establish an official Numismatics Department under the Curatorship of Ya'akov Meshorer (now Chief Curator of Archaeology). The purpose of such a department was, and still is, to exhibit the important numismatic material of ancient Eretz Israel, with an emphasis on Jewish coinage, while building a comprehensive collection of coins with a focus on those that circulated or were struck in the country over the ages. The Museum collection could not be haphazard, based on accidental numismatic finds or archaeological material in bad condition, unsuited to museological needs. Dr. Meshorer therefore began by seeking out the existing collections of connoisseurs who had assembled choice pieces. The Numismatic Collection and Exhibit of the Israel Museum was created, in a generous response to our efforts, primarily through donations from the following sources:

- the Meir Rosenberger Collection of local city coins struck in thirty-eight different cities during the Hellenistic and (mainly) Roman periods, donated by Rena and Robert Lewin;
- the L. Werner Collection of Jewish coins, local city coins, and an outstanding group of judaea Capta coins, donated by the Israel Government Coins and Medals Company;
- the Sholem Asch Collection of Jewish coins and local city coins, donated by Victor Carter;
- a collection of ancient Jewish coins including some of the rarest and best preserved Jewish coins in the world, donated by Abraham Bromberg;
- a collection of Greek silver and gold coins donated by Kurt Stem;
- a collection of Islamic gold, silver, and bronze coins donated by Paul Balog; the coins are of a very high quality and include a large number of unpublished and rare coins from throughout the Islamic world, as well as four original dies;
- an extensive collection of scripophily illustrating twentieth-century Eretz Israel, donated by Sidney Olson;

- the Jonathan Rosen donation of Greek hoards, the most important of which are two hoards of archaic Greek coins, one of Lydian staters and half-staters, and one of Ionian staters and smaller denominations found together with some jewelry.

To enhance specific aspects of the exhibit we have also received long-term loans from: the Israel Antiquities Authority, whose loans include new finds; the Museum of the Franciscan Biblical School in Jerusalem; the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Institute of Archaeology; and private collections. Naturally, the main purpose of the Numismatics Department is to exhibit historically important coins in a way that conveys their significance. This has been done not only by changing the permanent exhibits from time to time but also by mounting small or major exhibitions on specific subjects. In addition, smaller coin exhibits are frequently integrated into other parts of the archaeological displays. Main exhibitions presented by the Numismatics Department have included: "Imaginative Coins and Fantasy Shekels"; "The Production of Coins in the Ancient World"; "Coins of Israel, Old and New" (in cooperation with the Bank of Israel); "City Coins of Eretz Israel and the Decapolis"; and "The Coins of Aelia Capitolina - Roman Jerusalem". The Department has also arranged for an exchange of exhibitions between the National Museum of Mexico and the Israel Museum (on behalf of the Bank of Israel) and an exhibition of Jewish coins in Munich - "Das Heilige Land" (in cooperation with the Staatliche Münzsammlung München).

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER: FROM NUMISMATICS TO COINS

The new Coin Gallery, inaugurated in June 1994, is based on a completely different conception of coin exhibition. Unlike most numismatic galleries worldwide, which are intended mainly for connoisseurs and scholars, it may truly be called user-friendly. The physical setting of the gallery, in a small lobby near the Museum library, creates a feeling of intimacy from the outset, the sense that one has entered a space devoted exclusively to a specific subject. Apart from the first three showcases, the exhibit does not adhere to a chronological or thematic order, so that visitors may follow their own interests (and also avoid "bottlenecks" at specific spots). The showcases are arranged in groups of three, producing separate niches and contributing to the intimate atmosphere. Numismatic display is always somewhat problematic since rare and precious coins, while requiring proper protection, also demand the close inspection of the viewer. With this in mind, the Exhibition Department designed special showcases for the gallery that provide good illumination and bring the objects on display nearer to the visitor, who can feel free to lean on the cases thanks to their rounded edges. Magnifying glasses are provided for an extra close look, and even the texture of the coins can be experienced via three electrolytic cast enlargements made especially for the gallery. The lighting is particularly sophisticated in order to meet the needs of a numismatic display; for example, fibre optic techniques used in medicine make it possible to fix a small spot of light directly on a coin. Such state-of-the-art methods are juxtaposed with the technology and arts of the Ancient World, exemplified by the exquisite statue of Mercury, the Roman god of commerce that greets visitors as they enter the Coin Gallery.

The first three showcases of the display do, as mentioned, reflect a chronological/thematic structure and are meant to be viewed at the beginning, as an introduction to the exhibition. One case contains material related to pre-numismatic and alternative forms of payment, from cowrie shells to today's credit card. As the use of precious metals as payment grew, it became increasingly necessary to weigh ingots of gold, silver, and copper and evaluate their quality before each transaction. However, the systems of weights used in different lands did not coincide, which eventually led to the invention of coins - stamped pieces of metal of a guaranteed weight and quality. Thus, the last showcase in this section displays part of a hoard of archaic electrum coins (50% gold / 50% silver), which were struck in Miletus on the eve of the invention of coinage sometime during the seventh century BCE, along with the oldest coin found in Israel: an Athenian silver tetradrachm discovered in Jerusalem and dated to about 520 BCE.

One technique employed throughout the gallery is the inclusion of other ancient objects, such as statues, figurines, oil lamps, ring gems, and paintings, in order to elucidate or illustrate the designs appearing on coins. Objects related to the story behind the coin are also displayed. For example, a mosaic from a church in Kissufim (near Ashkelon), dated to 576 CE, depicts a wealthy lady donating sixteen gold coins (solidi), at the time the approximate equivalent of an average salary for a year and a half. We may assume that such a sum enabled the community to build the whole church or at least a significant part of the building. Below the mosaic, visitors can see what the patroness' donation may have looked like: the showcase contains sixteen Byzantine solidi from the same period.

Anyone curious to know the salary of one of the Roman soldiers who actually took part in the siege of Masada may take a look at the record of his wages, which was written on a papyrus and found at the site. Sums were deducted from the soldier's salary for food, clothing, and bandoleer; it appears that after all the deductions, Private C. Messius was left with a very meager paycheck. This example is not the only indication that things have not changed much in two thousand years. Inflation was also a standard phenomenon in Antiquity. A quick inspection of eight Roman silver coins from 1-306 CE shows how Roman emperors who minted coins with a 98% silver content at the beginning of this period began minting coins of increasingly debased silver; by the beginning of the fourth century, the silver component had been reduced to a mere 1%!

In ancient times, before the establishment of banks, hiding large amounts of money or jewelry was the only way to guarantee their safety. Most of the estimated 16,500 coins on display in the gallery belong to the numerous hoards incorporated into different parts of the exhibition. However, by far the largest of these - some 13,000 coins - was actually of very negligible contemporary value. Recovered from a shipwreck off the coast near Haifa, this block of coins dates from the early fifteenth century, when inflation in the area was at its peak: the fifty-kilo block was equivalent to a mere two grams of gold, or half an average monthly salary.

The fascinating story of Jerusalem through coins has a prominent place in the gallery, occupying its own corner of three showcases. With a few interruptions, coins have been minted in Jerusalem for a period of almost

1,600 years, from about 380 BCE to 1200 CE. During this long period, the name of the city on its coins changed several times:

1. YHD (Yehuda; Aramaic, Ancient Hebrew) c.350 BCE
2. Yerushalayim (Ancient Hebrew) 68 CE
3. Zion (Ancient Hebrew) 69 CE
4. AELIA CAPITOLINA COMMODIANA PIA FELIX (Latin) 250 CE
5. Yerosolima (Greek) c.640 CE
6. Iliya (Arabic) 660-680 CE
7. Al-Quds (Arabic) 832 CE
8. IERUSALEM. Jerusalem (Latin) 1163-1174 CE
9. CIV(ITAS) CRV(X). City of the Cross (Latin) 1170-1187 CE
10. YHD (Aramaic, Ancient Hebrew) New shekel of the State of Israel (reverse of the ancient coin from 350 BCE)

Another set of showcases presents the subject of coins in secondary use. Since ancient times, coins (particularly those made of gold and silver) have been used as a form of adornment - as jewelry, head ornaments, and so on. In fact, coins have been considered miniature works of art in their own right, and some of these masterpieces are displayed as such in a showcase devoted to coins of outstanding aesthetic value. Coins also served a very different and particularly interesting purpose: in medicine, they were apparently used to relieve pain.

The city coins of the Roman period (Imperial issues) provide a real wealth of historical evidence, thanks to the exceptional number of highly-productive mints in operation at the time; in Eretz Israel and Transjordan alone, the minting process reached a peak when thirty eight mints were active. Cities and towns would use coins to promote local cults and temples or advertise their commercial attractions, such as hot springs and ports for international trade. These qualities make city coins a faithful and, at times, unique source for understanding the many different components of the Roman Empire.

From all that has been said, it is clear that these ancient coins, once prized for their monetary worth, are now of tremendous educational value. The new Coin Gallery was conceived with this aspect in mind. Three spaces were set aside for changing exhibits that display the most recently unearthed numismatic material from various digs throughout the country. Plans are in progress for the creation of a sophisticated multimedia application, the ultimate direction for a comprehensive exhibition to take. The application will incorporate pictures, realistic two- and three-dimensional animations, written texts, and audio and video material. The result of combining these effects into a high-end resolution, interactive system will be a fascinating educational tool.

As the numbers of visitors clustering around the display cases already indicate, the time for a user-friendly, state-of-the-art approach to the ancient and often arcane subject of coins has arrived, and the Israel Museum takes pride in now being able to exhibit its own exceptional hoard of coins in surroundings that can do it justice.