A Grazing Horse and a Mare with a Foal-Achaemenid Motives in the Coinage of Antiochus III the Great? ¹

R. S. Wójcikowski¹

Received: 2019/09/23
Accepted: 2019/11/19

Abstract
The bronze coins of Antiochus III that are dated to the time of his great expedition to the East come from a mint in Ecbatana. The obverse depicts the diademed head of the king, whereas the reverse shows a grazing horse or a mare with a foal. Both motifs were absent from Seleucid coinage, but direct analogies can be found in Achaemenid seals. By placing these motifs on his coins, Antiochus III was likely attempting to portray himself as the rightful king of Iran.

Keywords: Antiochus III, Coins, Horse Motives, Grazing Horse and a Mare, Iran, Greece.

The coinage of Antiochus III, the Great (223-187 BC) featured various kinds of the horse motif. Whereas some depictions portrayed the king as a charging cavalryman with a spear, ¹¹ others presented horses by themselves. The obverse of the bronze coins minted in Ecbatana show the diademed head of the king. The reverse depicts a grazing horse with the legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΝΤΙΟΧΟΥ (Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 462, cat. no. 1264-1967; Newell, 1938: 213-214, cat. no. 618-621, Pl. XLVI, 13-18). The same mint produced bronze coins with an identical obverse and a different depiction on the reverse, although with the same legend. The reverse features a mare with a foal (Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 462, cat. no. 1268-1971; Mørkholm, 2001: 118, Pl. XXIV, 367; Newell, 1938: 214, Pl. XLVII, 1-8) (Fig. 1). The horses on the reverses seem to be naturally connected with the place where the coins were minted; Ecbatana, the capital of Media. ²² The presence of these animals on Antiochus III’s coins is currently interpreted as a reference to the role the Median cavalry played in the royal army. It is difficult, however, to directly link these depictions with battle.

In accordance with T.E. Newell’s classification (Newell 1918: 6-10), the way Antiochus III’s head is depicted on the aforementioned coins with a grazing horse belongs to the B type, which is analogous to the coins that present the king as a rider. On the coins with a mare and a foal, the face of Antiochus seems to be younger; it should therefore be concluded that they were most likely struck earlier. However, taking their theme, the depiction of horses, into account along with the fact that the coins were struck at the same mint in Ecbatana, it is assumed that they were issued roughly at the

¹. Institute of Archeology, Jagiellonian University, Poland.

robert.s.wojcikowski@gmail.com
same time (Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 462). The B-type coin is likely from the time period of ca. 211-209/8 BC (Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 358-359) or 209/8-207/6 BC (Newell 1938: 216).

While acknowledging the above-mentioned differences, it seems that the issues featuring horses on the reverses should be associated with Antiochus III’s expedition to the East in 212-205 BC, which was also indicated by the place of their minting. Media directly bordered the country of the Arsacids and constituted a significant point during Antiochus III’s expedition. The king was in Ecbatana in 211-210 BC, which was memorialized on bronze coins struck at uncertain mint 73, a military mint associated with Ecbatana. The coins, dated to 210 BC, depicted the diademed head of the king on the obverse and an elephant with a mahout and a tripod (Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 463-464 cat. no. 1272-1274; Newell, 1938: 220-221, cat. no. 632-637, Pl. XLI, 6-11.), or an elephant with an anchor, on the reverse (Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 464 cat. no. 1275-1277; Newell, 1938: 224-225, cat. no. 648-651, 654, Pl. XLIX, 4-6). The depictions of the king’s face on those issues are also recognized as B-type, which suggests that coins with various types of horse images can be dated to a similar time.

It seems by all means plausible that the horse motif has an association with Media. In ancient times, this country was renowned for its excellent cavalry (Bar-Kochva, 1976: 44) and famed Nisean horses (Horses played a tremendous role in the culture of Iran (Schmitt 2002). Achaemenid seals have been found to depict a grazing horse (de Clercq 1903: 38, Pl. VII, 102 bis) and a mare with a foal (Tuplin, 2010: 105) similar to the ones on Antiochus III’s coins. The motif of a grazing horse was earlier featured on Seleucus II’s bronze coins from Antioch (Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 260, cat. no. 710; Newell 1941: 168, cat. no. 1163-1166, Pl. XXXVI, 4-8), from where it was most likely borrowed by Antiochus III. Equivalents of this motif as well can be found on Achaemenid seals. A mare and a foal in Seleucid coinage cannot be found in the existing sources, it has to be assumed that this was not a coincidence, but a conscious reference to Achaemenid iconography.

The objective of Antiochus III’s expedition to the East was the restoration of Seleucid rule over the provinces that had been separated from the empire during the reign of his father, Seleucus II Callinicus (246-226 BC). The successful rebellions of Adragoras the satrap of Parthia (Iust. 41.4.7; Bickerman, 1983: 19; Wolski, 1969b; 1975) and
Diodotus, the satrap of Bactria (Iust. 41.4.5; Strab. 11.11.1; Wolski, 1960; 1969a; 1982), together with the Parni invasion under Arsaces I’s command (Iust. 41.4.7; Trog. Prol. 41; Strab. 11.9.2), led to a considerable reduction of the Seleucid territory in the East. The emergence of the countries of the Arsacids and Diodotids significantly weakened the dynasty’s authority and demonstrated that not only the Seleucids were able to rule in the East. This was also vivid proof of the empire’s helplessness, which could encourage other rebellions, as was indicated by the example of Molon, the satrap of Media and the governor of the Upper Satrapies.  

By placing Iranian motifs known from the Achaemenid period on his coins, Antiochus was able to portray himself as the only king of Iran, as opposed to the Parni invaders or Greco-Bactrian usurpers. Neither of the motifs (the grazing horse and the mare with a foal) had military connotations, and their peaceful nature could additionally emphasize the righteousness of Antiochus III’s rule. From the Achaemenid period came the depictions of a mare with a foal together with a winged disc (Collon, 1987: cat. no 923), which might suggest that this motif had religious connotations. Considering the significance of the horse in Iranian religion, such connotations should not be deemed strange (Briant, 2002: 248-252; Simons, 1994: 170; Shahbazi, 1987). The accounts of Herodotus (Hdt. 7.40.4), Xenophon (Xen. Cyr.. 8.3.12), and Quintus Curtius Rufus (Curt. An. 3.3.11) suggest the horse was connected with Ahura Mazda, who they referred to as Zeus/Jupiter (Boyce, 1984; Hoover, 1996: 48; Lorber & Issaï, 2009: 321; Sherwin-White & Kuhrt, 1993: 76; Olbrycht, 2016: 100). The Avesta described both Tishtrya (Yt. 8.18) and Verethragna (Yt. 14.9) as a white horse, which seems to indicate that the horse was not so much linked to a specific deity but rather represented the idea of the divine. Mare’s milk was used in religious rituals, such as the initiation of Achaemenid kings (Lewis & Llewellyn-Jones 2018: 133). If we are to accept the religious significance of the horse depictions on Antiochus III’s coins, the horse should be construed as a sign of divine support for the Seleucid ruler, which was an important from the perspective of the iconography of power. In fact, Antiochus’ coins had carried references to local cults in the past as well. Reviving old motifs was an important move from the perspective of the iconography of power.

Seleucid coinage also featured depictions of horned horses, including the horned horse heads known from the coins of Seleucus I and Antiochus I. Their meaning is interpreted in the context of military strength (Erickson, 2019: 138), although the presence of horns, a symbol of divinity in the Middle East (Erickson, 2013: 124; Troncoso, 2014: 61-62, Svenson, 1995: 40) that, the Seleucids most likely borrowed from Babylon (Anagnostou-Laoutides, 2012: 3-5; 2017: 155-156; Hoover, 1996: 28-29.), suggests that horses had a religious significance. It cannot be excluded that the horned horse symbolized the legitimacy and righteousness of royal power (Hoover, 1996: 97; Troncoso, 2014: 64).

A horse head, though without horns, is present on Antiochus III’s bronze coin from Seleucia-on-the-Tigris. The coin, minted after Molon’s rebellion, features the legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΝΤΙΟΧΟΥ. Its obverse depicts a young male bust facing three-quarters right in an elephant headdress. The bust is identified with Alexander the Great, although it is also thought to be an idealized depiction of Antiochus III (Houghton & Lorber 2002: 444 cat. no. 1182; Newell, 1938: 150, cat. no. 412A, Pl. XXI, 18; Le Rider, 1965: 25, cat.no. 27, Pl. i, 12). The horse head from the reverse, although it does not feature horns, seems to refer to the coins of Seleucus I and Antiochus I. The male bust in an elephant headdress, a symbol or royal power (Troncoso, 2013: 256), has a direct analogy in the coinage of the first Seleucid king, who borrowed this motif from the coins of Ptolemy I (323-283 BC) (Dahmen, 2007: 15; Erickson, 2011: 111; Hadley, 1974: 53). In his coinage, Antiochus III often used older motifs, which was a conscious reference to the period of the empire’s greatness. The most famous example is the restoration of Apollo
with a bow seated on an omphalos in place of the figure of standing Apollo, which had been put on coins by Seleucus II (Erickson, 2009: 195 2019: 125-126). Such a restoration was an obvious reference to the times before the crisis of the monarchy and the loss of provinces in the East.

Conclusion
Antiochus III strove to portray himself as the one rightful ruler of the empire. In the face of rebellions and usurpation not only in the East, but also in the West (Achaeus’ rebellion), the actions he undertook stopped the country’s decomposition and restored the dynasty’s authority. In the East, the king attempted to consistently subdue independent countries, through actions such as fighting a war against Media Atropatene after his victory over Molon or making an expedition to Armenia, which began his great eastern expedition. His goal was to eliminate each center of power that could rival the Seleucids in the East and restore the borders to their status from before the period of his father’s reign. Whether Antiochus III was able to carry out those plans is another issue, but they offer context that makes it easier to interpret the presence of the motifs of a grazing horse and a mare with a foal on his coins from Ecbatana. By using these motifs, Antiochus III made a reference to the Iranian tradition, which enabled him to present himself as the rightful ruler of all of Iran. It cannot be excluded that horses symbolized the divine legitimization of royal power. The sole image of these animals, which were so important in Iranian culture, constituted a clear sign that emphasized the king’s connection with Iran, as well as with the provinces that were separated from the empire and ruled by foreign dynasties.

Endnote
1. The present article was financed by the National Science Centre in Poland (FUGA 5 scholarship program, UMO-2016/20/S/HS3/00079).
2. Bronze coins that feature the king as a rider with a spear come from Ecbatana (Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 461, cat. no. 1259-1963). An analogous image is present on the bronze coins of Seleucus II from Seleucia-on-the-Tigris (Erickson 2019: 136-138, Fig. 3.11-12; Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 260, 274-275, cat. no. 709, 767-768; Newell 1941: 167, cat. no. 1162, Pl. XXXVI, 1-2). This motif, in the form of a horned rider on a horned horse featured on the drachmas, hemidrachms and tetradrachms struck in Ecbatana, also appeared in the Seleucid coinage of Seleucus I Nicator (Erickson 2019: 43-46, Fig. 1.8; Houghton & Steward, 1999: Pl. P.5.1, 1A; Houghton & Lorber, 2002: cat. no. 203; Newell, 1938: cat. no. 481, Pl. XXXVI, 9, 10).
3. In his description of Media, Polybius highlighted its unique location in the center of Asia, as well as the country’s wealth and military significance. According to him, there were many cities and villages in Media, and Ecbatana itself was surrounded by Greek cities (Plb 5.44; 10.27.1-3). When describing Media, Strabo mentions the earthquakes that were to destroy numerous cities and two thousand villages (Strab. 11.9.1). Even if those figures are exaggerated, this

Fig. 2. The bronze coins of Antiochus III the Great from Seleucia on the Tigris. Obverse: Young male head facing three-quarters in an elephant headdress; Reverse: Horse head. http://www.coinproject.com/siteimages/70-13657q00.jpg.
account indicates the wealth of the country. When Strabo moves on to describe the country under the Parthian dominion, he mentions multiple Greek cities founded by the Macedonians, which demonstrates the degree of Media’s urbanization (Strab. 11.13.6). Ecbatana, the capital of Media, was an important administrative center during the Seleucid period (Aperghis, 2004: 42).

IV. Antiochus III took over Armenia in the first place (Plb. 8.23.1-5, but his real target was the country of the Parni (Plb. 10.28-31; and Bactrian Greeks PIlb 10.49; 11.34). For Antiochus III’s eastern anabasis, see Grainger, 2015: 55-79; Kuht & Sherwin-White, 1993: 190-200; Lerner, 1999: 45-62; Wolski, 1996: 87-88; 1999, 75-78.

V. The most famous horses of antiquity were named after the Nisean plain in Media (Azzaroli, 1985: 89; Herzfeld, 1968: 8; Schmitt, 2002). In the New Assyrian Period, these horses were part of the tribute the Medes had to pay to the Assyrians (Shabani, 2005: 8). Herodotus wrote about Nisean horses taking note of their presence in the army of Xerxes I during the period of war against Greece (Hdt. 3.106.2; 7.40.2-4). According to Strabo, these horses were used by the Persian kings (Strab. 11.13.7; 11.14.9). When describing the parade of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in Daphne, Syria, Polybius lists Nisinus as one of the horse units present (Plb. 30.25.6). The name, which clearly refers to Nisean horses, suggests that the unit was comprised of Iranian riders who came from Media (Sekunda, 1994: 22). According to another interpretation, they may not have been from Media, but were armed in a similar manner as the Medes (Bar-Kochva, 1979: 74).

VI. The causes and course of Molon’s rebellion were described by Polybius (Plb 5.43-54).

VII. In order to memorialize his victory over Molon, Antiochus III struck coins at Susa featuring a female head in an elephant headaddress on the obverse and the goddess Artemis with a bow on the reverse (Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 454 cat. no. 1224-1225; Newell, 1938: 150, cat. no. 410-411). Nanaia from Susa and Anahita from Iran, who were identified with Artemis during the Hellenistic period, were probably also portrayed as the Greek goddess (de Jong, 1997: 273; Martinez-Sève, 2015; Le Rider, 1965: 293-296; Tarn, 1966: 69). The image of the goddess can be interpreted as an expression of the local deities’ support for Antiochus, similarly to an analogous image known from a coin of Seleucus II that was also struck in Susa (Iossif & Lorber, 2009 109).

VIII. The image of a horned horse head is known from the obverse of silver tetradrachms that feature an elephant and the legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΣΕΛΕΥΚΟΥ on the obverse were struck at Pergamon (Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 15, cat. no. 1.2) and an uncertain mint likely located in Asia Minor (Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 15, cat. no. 2). A half of a horned horse appears on coins minted in the eastern part of the empire (Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 474, add. 16, 18).

IX. A Syrian mint in Europos (Dura) struck bronze coins with a horned horse head on the obverse and a bow on the reverse and the legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΝΤΙΟΧΟΥ (Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 115, 136-137, cat. no. 367-368; Newell, 1941: 80, cat. 882-883, Pl. XIII 9-10). In Bactria (Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 161, cat. no. 469, 471; Wright, 2010: 117-118, Fig. 67) and in Carrhae (Newell, 1941: 47-48, cat. no. 784-787), coins were struck with a horned horse head on the reverse and the legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΣΕΛΕΥΚΟΥ as well as the head of Seleucus I in a horned diadem. An identical set of images is featured on the coins from Sardes (Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 124, cat. no. 322; Wright 2010: 117, Fig. 66) and, Europos (Dura) (Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 136-137, cat. no. 363, Newell, 1941: 79, cat. no. 878-879), but with the legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΝΤΙΟΧΟΥ. From Al Khanoum (Houghton & Lorber, 2002: 151-153, cat. no. 426-434) and an uncertain mint also located in the eastern part of the empire (Houghton, Lorber 2002: 475, add. 21) came coins with a horned horse head on the obverse and the legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΝΤΙΟΧΟΥ with the head of Antiochus I in a hornless diadem on the obverse.


Reference


- de Clercq L. (1903). Catalogue méthodique et raisonné. Antiquités assyriennes -
cylindres orientaux, cachets, briques, bronzes, bas-reliefs etc. publié par M. De Clercq,
London: British Museum Publications.
- Dahmen, K. (2007). The Legend of Alexander the Great on Greek and Roman
Greco-Persian iconography in the Seleukid empire”. In N. Holmes (ed.), Proceedings
of the XIV International Numismatic Congress. Glasgow: International Numismatic
Council, pp. 163-168.
Melville, (eds.), Every Inch a King: Comparative Studies on Kings and Kingship in
York: Routledge.
Hellenistic Studies 94, pp: 50-65
Hamilton.
Part I-II: Seleucus I through Antiochus III. New York: The American Numismatic
Society, Lancaster; London: Classical Numismatic Group.
Great on a new tetradrachm of Seleucus I”. Schweizerische numismatische Rundschau
78, pp: 27-35.
78, pp: 87-115
Hemingway, (eds.), Pergamon and the Hellenistic Kingdoms of the Ancient World. New
York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, pp: 70-76.
Literature. Leiden: Brill.
Group.
the foundations of Arsacid Parthia and Graeco-Bactria. Historia Einzelschriften 123.
Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
16 (1), pp: 19-42.
Encyclopedia Iranica (http://wwwiranicaonlineorg/articles/susa-iv-hellenistic-
parthian-periods).
- Meeus, A. (2009). “Alexander’s Image in the Age of the Successors”. In Heckel,