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The Alexandrian coinage of Hadrian. The hoard evidence

Coinage from Hadrian's reign is prominent in all collections of Alexandrian coins. According to my survey from 1983-84, they made up 3,355 tetradrachms in the main public collections or 8.14 % of the total of billon coins, and 5,298 bronze coins (excl. nometypes) or 23.86 % of totals¹. Apart from Milne's introduction to his Catalogue² –and my lecture in 1973³– the lecture today will be the first survey and discussion of the hoard evidence.

By a hoard I mean at least two coins (or at least one coin and another object of value) apparently purposely buried together or lost –and preferably found together.⁴

In my survey of hoards from 1985 I counted 2,131 billon coins or 2.89 % of totals.⁵ This is, of course, far less than Nero (15.10 %), but more than any other emperor between Nero and Valerian (3.34 %), some of whom also reigned a long span of years. I also counted 55 bronze coins or 8.77 (17.02) %, which is a high but not very high percentage compared to, e.g., Antoninus Pius (9.88/19.19%).⁶ Recently, I have counted 52 out of 814 Alexandrian bronze coins in the stray find groups,⁷ but I suspect a higher number among the “illegible” and “worn” pieces.

As always, the hoard evidence has defects, and conclusions must –as far as possible– be based on many different hoards from different locations. In my forthcoming book (*Coinage in Roman Egypt*. The hoard evidence) I have divided the evidence into four groups: 1) *Karanis*, meaning the hoards found during the University of Michigan Excavations 1924-1935 in Kôm Aushîm; 2) *other “excavation hoards”*, meaning other hoards for which we have sufficiently certain knowledge about circumstances of find; 3) *Dattari*, meaning the coin groups Dattari sold to Milne 1905-1914; 4) *“other supposed hoards”*, meaning other groups of coins which are claimed to be or have been acquired as original hoards, but about which we have no certain evidence of find circumstances.

31 hoards of Alexandrian billon coins have a total of 2,236 from Hadrian's reign in the following way:

Karanis: 14 coins in 4 hoards, with a range of 1-10 and deposited 257/58-295/96.

Other excavation hoards: 818 coins in 12 hoards, with a range of 1-572 and deposited 127/28-261/62.

Dattari: 1,138 coins in 8 hoards, with a range of 1-360 and deposited 156/57-295/96.

Other supposed hoards: 266 coins in 7 hoards, with a range of 7-79 and deposited (shortly after) 130/31-258/59.

This is sufficiently valuable evidence for conclusions concerning the original production and circulation of coins, although in relative terms only, and there are no die-studies and therefore no possible estimates of actual numbers. On the other hand, I have been able now to present no more than 16 hoards of bronze coins, with a total of 769, whereof 63 from Hadrian's reign, which allow no safe conclusions. It may though be interesting to note that 15 are found in a contemporary hoard (A39)⁸, and four (together with other early bronze coins) are found in the Batn Ihrîit Hoard (A84) deposited as late as AD 230-31.

Since the billon tetradrachms from Hadrian's reign have the same size, weight and intrinsic value as the coins from the previous period following Nero's depreciation, the new coins of Hadrian could have

1. Christiansen (1983-84), pp. 11 and 15.

2. Milne (1933/71), pp. xxi f.

3. Christiansen (1973/76), pp. 246f.

4. For further discussion and references see Christiansen (forthcoming).

5. Christiansen (1985), p. 81.

6. Christiansen (1985), p. 86. Percentage depends on inclusion of A31.

7. Christiansen (2003-2004), p. x.

8. A-nos. refer to Christiansen (1985)

mingled easily with the old coins. They may have replenished or increased the existing pool. Many old coins will have left the pool by hoarding. Other coins may have been called in due to wear or to provide bullion for coins advertising the ruling emperor and his deeds. New coins had to be struck if there was not enough in the treasury to cover public expenditure and other payments.

Only two sufficiently known billon hoards have been deposited during Hadrian's rule: Kôm el-Asl 1895/96 (A36), containing three contemporary coins out of 62 (whereof 44 from time of Nero), and El Hiba 1934/35 (A37), containing only one contemporary coin out of 216 (whereof 184 from time of Nero). This picture is generally confirmed by another, but insufficiently known hoard (A40) and –even more revealing– by two hoards of false tetradrachms: The hoard bought by Newell (A41): 73 Nero and 3 Hadrian, and the hoard reported by Dattari (A38): 300 Nero and 1 Hadrian.

We have 25 hoards from the period 138/39-260/61 containing billon coins from Hadrian's reign, always together with earlier coins, especially from Nero's reign, and always in a minority of 20 % or less, apart from one hoard: the as yet unpublished Abu el-Gud 1968,⁹ which contained 103 Hadrian-tetradrachms and only 12 older pieces.

Four late hoards, deposited 264/5-295/6, still contain a few tetradrachms from Hadrian's reign, in three cases together with likewise few older coins.

Looking at the distribution on years (*Table 1*), it will be no surprise to have no tetradrachm from the first Egyptian year, which lasted only three weeks in AD 117, when Egypt even “was thrown into disorder by riots”, according to *Historia Augusta*¹⁰ (whatever its worth!). According to the same author (XII.1), Alexandria was harassed by riots in AD 122/23, due to discovery of a new Apis, which may explain the absence of year 7.

It is not surprising to find a high production in year 15 (AD 130/31), the year of Hadrian's visit to Egypt¹¹, also witnessed by the reverse of Alexandria standing with the Emperor, a very frequent type on billon as well as bronze coins (*Plate*)¹², and an extraordinary instance of known events illustrated by the Alexandrian coinage.

It is more surprising that the Jewish War AD 132-35 (years 17-20) does not seem to have caused a remarkable increase –and indeed is not reflected by the reverse-types of the billon coins and rarely in the bronze coinage. Admittedly, it was not a very glorious war for the Romans, whereas the flood of the Nile at the same time was “inadequate”,¹³ and there is no obvious reason why the war expenses were defrayed in Egypt. Yet, this may serve as a warning against explaining coin production as mainly caused by warfare and types caused by actual events.

It is even more surprising to find the peak of the curve in year 10 (AD 125/26), for which no event is reported, apart perhaps from completion of the wall in Britain, which hardly would be reflected in the coinage of Egypt! Nor, by the way, do I believe that the sporadic occurrence of Nike-types on coins from years 5-6 may be associated with the construction works of this wall.¹⁴ The relatively high production of tetradrachms in year 10 and –to some extent– also year 20 may of course reflect the decennialia and the vicennialia respectively. If so, however, it is not reflected in the reverse types.

In conclusion, questions may be more fruitful than answers. I hope to have made clear that the oscillations in the yearly production of tetradrachms during Hadrian's rule cannot be sufficiently explained by known events. Nor is there to my knowledge anything to indicate an increased demand of coinage due to increased production or increasing prices. Heavy devastations in Egypt during the Jewish revolt at the end of Trajan's reign may have caused expensive reconstruction works to follow, and it may be interesting to note that when the coin production began in year 2, it appears to have happened before the mint officials had obtained information about the titles and portrait of the new emperor.¹⁵ But generally, the coin production seems to have been higher in the last ten years than in the first nine.

It may seem tempting to suggest that the Roman government, in the province of Egypt at least, success-

9. Information from Professor Hans-Christoph Noeske.

10. *Historia Augusta* V.3.

11. Halfmann (1986), pp. 193 f.

12. Emmett (2001), pp. 47 and 51.

13. Birley (1997), p. 287.

14. As claimed by Casey (1987), p. 69.

15. Cf. Milne (1917), pp. 31 ff.

fully tried to replenish the coin pool. Almost sixty years had elapsed since the enormous production of billion tetradrachms during the latter part of Nero's reign, the Alexandrian mint had on the whole been rather inactive in the following period, and the pool of coins may even have decreased. It was now necessary –or thought necessary– to replenish it, in order

to maintain the closed currency system and payment of taxes in the Emperor's "silver" coins.

If that is true, the main question will be who made that decision and based on what information, furthermore, why the replenishment was effected in such an oscillating way from year to year.

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SNG Cop 41, n° 360



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Table I

