

MONETIZATION OF ROMAN EGYPT DURING THE FLAVIAN DYNASTY (AD 69–96): THE CASE OF ALEXANDRIA AND BERENIKE

Katarzyna Lach

Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw

Abstract: A study of coin output in Egypt during the Flavian dynasty (AD 69–96) brings to light a dichotomy in circulation between billon tetradrachms and low denomination bronze coins. The composition of hoards with Flavian silver issues suggests minimal coin production due to a sufficient quantity of Nero's tetradrachms on the market. However, stray finds of coins from the Flavian dynasty consist mainly of bronze issues, apparently outnumbering Nero's low-denomination coin output. A tempting idea to consider is that the low number of Flavian silver coins in circulation resulted in an extended production of bronze issues.

Keywords: Roman provincial Egypt, Alexandrian coinage, Flavian dynasty

For almost three centuries the economy of Roman Egypt was based on a relatively stable currency administered by the government. The boost in the provincial economy came with the widespread use of coins in commercial transactions (Harl 1996: 117). Nonetheless, it is essential to distinguish the concept of economic prosperity of the province from the assets of local inhabitants, half of whose income was collected in the form of taxes.

Yet the process of monetization of Egypt did not proceed evenly. In Ptolemaic times some taxes were paid in coins, while the rest in grain. These proportions

were reversed during the age of Roman supremacy over the province of Egypt (Harl 1996: 254), and this is likewise observed in increased coin production. The greater numbers of coins in everyday life were the result of Roman policy toward the provinces.

There were several reasons behind the demand for struck coins in Egypt. On the one hand, a closed currency system prevented a relocating of coins to other provinces, but it also precluded the use in Egypt of currency struck outside the province. The monitoring of the quantity of coins issued aimed to reduce the risk of

inflation and of decreasing real currency value. Papyri found in Egypt are, in most cases, records of accounts, which confirm the stable value of the currency during the 1st century AD. The average value of grain between AD 45/46 and AD 78/79 increased by two drachms per artaba, but these prices had almost doubled by the end of the 2nd century AD (Duncan-Jones 1990: 146–147).

Papyri also provide information regarding the amount and form of payments. Taxes were paid in struck money and in kind depending on the product (Duncan-Jones 2002: 189). Currency was also used in the widespread rent of private land for tenancy farming (van Minnen 2008: 230–231). Since most of the land was in the hands of the Roman emperor from Nero's time, it should be emphasized that profit was made concurrently on land rental and land tax (Sartre 1997: 471). Another important fact highlighted by Peter van Minnen is that the income from Egyptian taxes was not intended to be invested back in the province (van Minnen 2008: 238). Grain was transported to warehouses in Rome, while the currency struck in Egypt was exchanged in Alexandria. Merchants leaving the province would exchange Alexandrian tetradrachms for Roman denarii to use in other parts of the Empire. Apart from commercial transactions and tax payments, the local currency was also used to raise loans (e.g., van Minnen 2008: 230).

In Egypt, as in Greece, monetization of the country should be distinguished from the spread of coins (von Reden 2010: 25–26). Barter, particularly widespread in the rural parts of the province isolated from trade routes, enjoyed a centuries-old tradition in Egypt. Trade of this kind often

operated simultaneously with monetary exchange, being thus visible evidence of prosperity (Rathbone 2002: 162)

Stray finds are of greater importance than hoards for specifying the extent of Egyptian monetization. This coin category consists mainly of lower denomination fractions struck in bronze and more seldom of billon tetradrachms. Stray finds reflect the extent of coin use in everyday life more precisely than hoards (Crawford 1970: 40), which were collected for longer periods and consisted of coins that were not necessarily in circulation at the time of deposition (Katsari 2011: 10–19). Finds of single coins lost by owners come from every place of human activity, not only urban and rural areas, but also military camps and burial places. The percentage of coins found during excavations varies depending on fieldwork methods and the size of the excavated area, sometimes restricted by modern housing development, as in Alexandria for example. Moreover, the degree of wear of single bronze coins found in the excavations may contribute data on the intensity of their circulation.

Another issue to be considered is the length of time that passed before a coin went out of circulation. The picture presented by stray finds from the late Roman North necropolis in Antinoupolis (Castrizio 2010: 7) illustrates how problematic this matter can be. The site, which is dated between the 4th and 9th century AD, yielded two Ptolemaic coins, a denarius of Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra and a few other coins from the 1st–2nd century AD (Castrizio 2010: 271–272). The presence of these specimens at the site, which is otherwise clearly late Roman in date, is probably accidental.

A study of stray coin finds from excavations indicates that most of the billion tetradrachms dated between the reign of Tiberius and that of Marcus Aurelius, when a devaluation of money took place, were found in the Delta, Fayum Oasis and modern Ismailia (Christiansen 2006: 19). This demonstrates a larger share of coins in wealthy rural areas and in the vicinity of border crossings. The 1st century bronze coins from Egypt and the tetradrachms share a similar percentage distribution (Christiansen

2006: 19). The most common fractions are drachms and diobols (Christiansen 2005: 280); however, these coins are bigger and, therefore, easier to find.

The following case study encompasses two very different harbor cities: Alexandria and Berenike. Alexandria used to be a metropolitan city, whereas Berenike served as a trading port on the peripheries of the province. It is interesting nonetheless to seek out similarities in the monetization of these two localities.

ALEXANDRIA

Excavations by the Polish Archaeological Mission at the Kom el-Dikka site in Alexandria unearthed private buildings from the 1st through 3rd century AD. House H1 in the eastern part of the site was built on top of the remains of a late Hellenistic domicile (Majcherek 1990: 77–78). Pottery finds have dated the structure to the 1st and beginning of the 2nd century, and its destruction and abandonment to the 3rd century AD (Majcherek 1991: 23). All of the coins found within the house were struck during the 1st century AD, which was the most intense period of its exploitation. The biggest share in this set is that of coins of emperors of the Julio-Claudian Dynasty: Augustus, Tiberius and Claudius (11), this compared to just three specimens representing the reigns of Nero and Domitian (Lichocka 1995: 112–113). This cluster includes obviously only a fraction of the coins that are to be found in early Roman contexts in this area.

Roman coins are usually found in layers of accumulated fill, precluding systematic analysis of coinage use. In the words of Michael Crawford, “groups of coins from well-excavated and well-recorded strata are sadly infrequent” (1970: 40). House H is a commendable exception in view of its well documented strata, making the struck coins from its contexts excellent evidence for everyday coin use in early Roman Alexandria. Based on this set one is secure to say that issues struck during the reign of Nero, otherwise common in hoards, constituted only a small fraction of the coins found in the house.

Other evidence of coin use in Alexandria comes from excavations conducted by the Centre d’études alexandrines in different parts of the city. These have yielded 264 coins from the reign of Augustus to the time of Diocletian’s reform in AD 296 (Picard et al. 2012: 125).¹ Investigations in the area of the Alexandrian Library (Bruccheion

¹ The reform should be regarded as a long time process: the *folles* was introduced in Egypt probably around AD 294 and was circulated together with coins minted in the province until AD 295/296 (Sutherland 1955: 117–118).

quarter) and the Gabbari necropolis have documented a percentage distribution of coins similar to that observed in House H on Kom el-Dikka. Most of the coins were struck in the reigns of Augustus (76), Tiberius (34) and Claudius (18). Moreover, coins struck during the Flavian period (nine coins each of Vespasian and

Domitian) prevailed over Nero's issues (seven coins). Again, estimates regarding the share of Nero's coinage in 1st and 2nd century coin use in Egypt seem exaggerated. Erik Christiansen has proven that Nero's issues dominated in hoards for almost a century (2004: 91), but the stray finds give a slightly different picture.

BERENIKE

Stray coin finds from excavations in the coastal area of the Berenike harbor on the Red Sea constitute additional evidence of monetization in this region and reflect on periods of intensive trading. The harbor was founded by Ptolemy II about 275 BC, while its depopulation and abandonment was dated to sometime before the mid-6th century AD (Sidebotham, Hense, and Nouwens 2008: 159, 174). Excavations have been conducted in the harbor bay, the residential, religious and industrial districts as well as a harbor rubbish dump. Three phases of intensive trade and production activity have been identified (Wendrich et al. 2003: 49). The first stage was when Berenike was a handling point for African elephants used in the Ptolemaic army, from the time of founding through the mid-2nd century BC. The next phase of economic growth was dated to about the 1st century AD, when trade contacts with India and the Arabian peninsula intensified. The last phase of the city's prosperity began about the middle of the 4th century and lasted through the beginning of the 5th, even though Berenike has lost its superior function of a handling harbor by the end of this era.

The local economy of the city can be investigated through a study of a large collection of ostraka coming from the early Roman rubbish dump investigated extensively at the site. Most of these documents date to AD 40–70 and were permits issued for goods at the custom station of Berenike for export to Africa, Arabia or India (Bagnall, Helms, and Verhoogt 2005: 64; Nappo and Zerbini 2011: 63).² It is consistent with the archaeological evidence showing a peak in commercial activities in Berenike in the 1st century AD. Coin finds provide additional evidence for a local trade. About 40% of the identifiable/attributable coins from Berenike date to the 1st century AD (Sidebotham 2011: 79). The most common issues of the 1st century are those of Claudius (11 coins), Augustus (six coins), Tiberius, Nero and Vespasian (five coins per emperor). The Berenikan evidence seems to corroborate Christiansen's (2006: 14) assumption that stray finds reflect actual coin circulation. Coins dated to the 2nd and 3rd century AD comprise only 6% of all the finds, corresponding to a recession that touched the city during

² Nappo suggests that Roman denarii and aurei were part of the cargos shipped through Berenike to be used by merchants in India (Nappo and Zerbini 2011: 67–68), but there is no archaeological evidence from the site for this. Hélène Cuvigny does not support this hypothesis (2013: 69).

these centuries due to the economic downturn and political unrest, which led to a drop in the size of the population (Sidebotham 2011: 63). Coins of the 4th century in Berenike make up 33%

of all stray finds from the site, indicating a slight renewal of trade and commerce in this period, prior to the ultimate stagnation and abandonment of the city (Sidebotham 2011: 261).

CONCLUSIONS

The evidence from both Alexandria and Berenike shows that low-denomination coins from the Flavian dynasty are far more frequent among stray finds than the tetradrachms of these emperors found in hoards. Alexandrian hoards found in Egypt consist mostly of billon tetradrachms. Hoards with Flavian coins are dated up to the early 3rd century AD. Billon tetradrachms of Vespasian, Titus and Domitian are much rarer than issues of Nero [Fig. 1], as demonstrated already by Erik Christiansen (1985: 95, 105, 109).

Rulers of the Flavian dynasty did not need to issue huge amounts of tetradrachms, because the market had been sufficiently supplied by previous rulers. Quantitative studies of coin output during the early years of Vespasian's rule have also confirmed observations regarding the hoard deposits. Furthermore, it is tempting to see in the tetradrachms struck by the Flavian rulers (especially by Vespasian and Titus) a means for the introduction of the image of the new emperor. Christiansen also assumes that

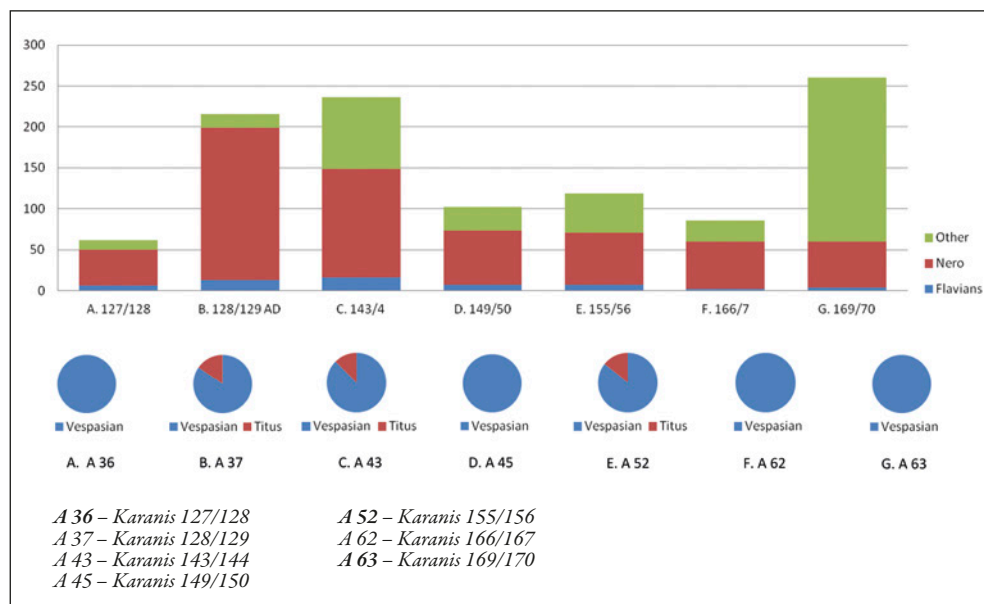


Fig. 1. Structure of Nero's and Flavian's issues in hoards
(Based on Christiansen 2004: 169–197)

the new issues of Vespasian paid for war expenditures, whereas issues of Nero were spent on taxes or used in trade (Chritiansen 2004: 98).

However, the quantities of low-denomination coins of the Flavians in circulation seem to have matched those of Nero. Of course, this applies mainly to the bronze issues, as they are found far more frequently during excavations than silver. Bronze coins deteriorate relatively quickly and they tended to be lost more often, therefore the market was in need of a continuous re-supply with new issues.

Alexandria and Berenike, linked by routes that served the merchants who imported goods from Arabia and India via the Eastern Desert, however different in their importance and meaning, were trade points of great value to their surroundings. Alexandria was Egypt's main port and there is no need to demonstrate its significance. As for Berenike,³ it was an important trade stop in the area. The troops stationed in the forts along the desert roads must have played a stimulating role in the monetization of the region. It has already been observed (von Reden 2010: 268) that the Roman army encouraged the practice of monetary exchange. Berenike's local market served both regional consumers and soldiers, who would use newly minted coins received as

pay, thus allowing a remote countryside to benefit from contemporary coin issues.

If the assumption that the evidence of stray finds reflects actual coin circulation is correct, it can be said that the Flavians issued only a limited number of tetradrachms, but they supplemented the market with low-value coins used for common transactions. Tetradrachms vanished from circulation mainly because of hoarding and it is probable that bronze coins were struck instead to meet the market demand. In this case, there may be an inverse relation of the ratio between bronze and silver coins, meaning that the dropping quantity of silver coins would compel the authorities to increase the output of bronze coins. Producing more tetradrachms was out of the question as it would have lowered the value of the already debased Egyptian silver coins. The only way to complement the demand for struck coin seems to have been the decision to issue bronze coins.

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Dr. Katarzyna Lach
Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw
00-497 Warsaw, Poland, ul. Nowy Świat 4
lach.k2@gmail.com

³ The division of trade between Berenike and Myos Hormos during the 1st century AD is much disputed (see Bagnall 1976: 34–35).

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