

Nabatean Coinage

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Coins of Nabatean kings were first minted in the late 2nd century BCE (Meshorer 1975). The first coins were crude bronze imitations of the gold coins of Alexander the Great. The obverse depicts the head of Athena and the reverse depicts Nike (the goddess of victory). Some of these coins bear the single Greek letter A (standing for Aretas?). Others depict the head of a bearded Nabatean king instead of the head of Athena (Aretas II?).

During the early 1st century BCE, the Nabateans struck lead coins similar to the previous ones along with new types depicting a bull; on one of them the Nabatean inscription "Nabat" appears for the first time.

Aretas III, the Nabatean king who ruled Damascus between 84–71 BCE, struck there silver and bronze coins on which he calls himself "King Aretas the Philhellene". However, these coins are not actual Nabatean coins but rather coins of Damascus. Similar coins were struck there by other rulers such as Tigranes king of Armenia. Real Nabatean minting only began under Obodas II (62–60 BCE) who minted silver coins in denominations of one or two drachms. The obverse depicts the characteristic head of a bearded Nabatean king with long hair. The reverse depicts an eagle, imitating that on the contemporary Ptolemaic and Tyrian silver coins. The Nabatean inscription is "Of Obodas King of Nabatea", and his regal year is indicated as well. His son Malichus I, who succeeded him (60–30 BCE), minted silver and bronze coins. His portrait is distinguished by very long curly hair. The silver coins of Malichus I depict an eagle, the large bronze coins a cornucopia, the medium denominations an eagle, and the small denominations depict the palm of a hand. The cornucopia was a typical Hellenistic symbol of fertility used by all the people of the area. The palm of a hand probably represented the Nabatean god Yad-Ramah, as suggested by J. Patrich (1990:134).

Obodas III succeeded his father Malichus I (30–9 BCE). Josephus describes the bitter struggle between him and the Jews during the time of his coregent Herod the Great. Obodas minted many silver and bronze coins, some of which depict the jugate heads of him and his wife. The appearance of a queen on his coins is an innovation, although her name is not indicated. On some of the coins her portrait is depicted separately (Fig. 33), on others she is depicted as a figure facing left, raising her right arm.

In 9 BCE, following the death of Obodas III, Syllaios (head of the Nabatean army under Obodas III) usurped the throne. It took Aretas IV, the son of Obodas III, almost a year to restore order to Nabatea and regain his position, with the aid of the Romans. During the months that Syllaios ruled, he minted silver and bronze coins bearing his name in full or abbreviated. It is unclear whether the young head depicted on his coins is Syllaios himself or Aretas IV; or whether the bearded head depicted on other coins is his or that of Obodas III (Fig. 34).

Aretas IV (9 BCE–40 CE) is considered the greatest of all Nabatean kings. During his rule Nabatea flourished and reached its height of economic power, as expressed by the establishment of impressive international trade routes. Through the harbor of Gaza the Nabateans shipped their goods (incense, spices and perfumes) to the Mediterranean countries. The Nabatean kingdom spread throughout eastern Transjordan, from northern Arabia in the south to Damascus in the north. The Nabateans built cities and commercial stations in the Negev and settled in the region between Petra and Gaza. Extensive Nabatean settlement has also been revealed in Sinai.

Aretas IV minted large quantities of silver and bronze coins of various denominations. During his 10th and 11th years (1–2 CE) he suffered a temporary economic crisis that forced him to mint bronze coins as substitutes for silver ones. On the large bronze coins of these two years, the head of the king is accompanied by the inscription "Aretas King of Nabatea, the lover of his people, a silver Ma'ah". The half denomination has the inscription "half a silver" (Fig. 35). The coins of Aretas IV bear, for the first time, the name of the Queen and her title next to her head. Coins from 9 BCE to 17 CE depict the heads and names of both Aretas IV and his first wife Huldu (9 BCE–16 CE), who is titled "Huldu Queen of the Nabateans". On later coins, struck between 18 and 39 CE, his second wife is represented, accompanied by the inscription: "Shaqilat Queen of the Nabateans". One of his sons, Phasa'el, is also mentioned on some bronze coins.

Malichus II, son of Aretas IV, was crowned king in 40 CE after his father's death. He did not possess the energy and charisma of his father, and we know little about him. His coins are few and not as varied as those of his father. He continued to strike silver and bronze coins using his father's prototypes (Fig. 36). An

interesting phenomenon is the title of his wife on the coins: "Shaqlat his Sister, Queen of the Nabateans". This is additional evidence for the rise in the status of the Nabatean queen.

According to Josephus, Malichus II helped the Romans during the Jewish War (66–70 CE). His disappearance in 70 CE suggests the possibility that he was killed during this war. He was succeeded by his son, Rabbel II (70–106 CE), who continued to mint silver and bronze coins. The silver coinage was crudely made, the silver content is poor. Silver coins from the beginning of his reign bear the portrait of Shaqlat II accompanied by the inscription "Shaqlat his mother, Queen of the Nabateans". This indicates that the king's mother possessed even higher status than the king's wife Gamilat (76–101 CE) with her title "Gamilat his sister, Queen of the Nabateans" (Fig. 37). On the later bronze coins of Rabbel II, his second wife Hagiru (102–106 CE) is depicted.

Rabbel II was the last Nabatean king and he surrendered to the Romans without a battle. In 106 CE Trajan turned Nabatea into "Provincia Arabia".

"The Benediction of Dushara "

One of the most interesting coins found recently bears the exceptional inscription "the benediction of Dushara" (ברכת דושרא). Dushara was the main god of the Nabateans, and this expression was intended either to bestow success on the user, or perhaps on the coin itself. In any case, this is a numismatic innovation (Fig. 33).

The Mint

Where were the Nabatean coins minted? We assume that they must have been minted at Petra, the Nabatean capital and by far the largest Nabatean city. This conclusion is also hinted at by the coins themselves, as most of them depict an enigmatic sign: a small ring [O]. This sign has no meaning in Nabatean epigraphy, and our interpretation is that it is a graphic representation of the Nabatean name of Petra. The Nabateans called their capital "Reqem" (רְקֵם, see Mishnah, Gittin, 1:1: Hareqem and Haheger) meaning, in Aramaic, a ring or round spot. Thus the Nabatean mint probably followed the practice of other ancient mints in using mintmarks to symbolize the name of the city (when there was a meaning, see: phoenix the murex-shell as the mint mark of Tyre [Phoenix]). One coin of Aretas IV bears the name "Hagra", indicating that some coins were minted elsewhere.

The study of Nabatean coins is crucial to the reconstruction of Nabatean history. The chronology of the Nabatean monarchy is based on the numismatic evidence.