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## A Note on Three Hellenistic Coins from the Collections of Russian Museums

**Keywords:** Seleukids, iconography, Hellenism, numismatics, mintmark, Antioch

### Introduction

Two Moscow museums – the State Historical Museum (HSM) and the State Museum of Oriental Art (Orient Museum) keep three rare Hellenistic coins, which are of a great numismatic interest. The first one (№1) is a tetradrachm of the Seleukid king Alexander Balas has remained unpublished until recently<sup>1</sup>. The second coin (№2) has been already published earlier<sup>2</sup>, but was misattributed and needs to be reattributed with due caution, while the third (№3) coin has never been published until this paper. The coin of Alexander Balas is of the well-known type - “Zeus Nikephoros”, which presents on the obverse a portrait of the king and on the reverse an image of Zeus seated on throne. №2 and №3 are of the so-called “Ba’al/Zeus” type or “lion staters”, which was widely struck by the mints of Babylon, Susa and Ecbatana during the early Hellenistic period. This type displays on the obverse a figure of seated on throne Ba’al/Zeus holding sceptre and advancing lion on the reverse. All presented coin types are known and received some scholarly attention. However, these specimens offer substantial new material particularly to the corpus of Hellenistic coinage: №1 and №3 are examples of previously unknown series, while №2 is a rare early Hellenistic emission with debatable attribution. The following study presents three notes on three rare Hellenistic coins that are held in the collections of Russian Museums and provides some thoughts and remarks concerning attribution of these coins. We mainly focus on the iconographic and stylistic features of each coin type as well as on the analysis of the coin controls, which could be helpful for understanding of the coinage of the Hellenistic East.

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<sup>1</sup> ZAKHAROV Ye.V. & SMIRNOV 2017: Nos. 51

<sup>2</sup> SAZONOVA 1994.



AR. Tetradrachm. Zeus Nikephoros type. Antioch on the Orontes. № KR ON 454192.  
 Obv. Diademed head of Alexander I r., diadem ends falling straight behind, fillet border.  
 Rev. ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ in two lines on r., ΘΕΟΠΑΤΟΡΟΣ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ in two lines on l., Zeus enthroned l., resting on scepter and holding Nike facing r., offering wreath.  
 Date (in ex.): ΕΞΡ – (SE 165 = 148/7 BCE).  
 Mintmark (inner l.): a composition of loop, tie and four-ended item.  
 15,53 gr.; ø 26,6–28 mm; 12.  
 Reference: The closest type is SC 1784.2 or CSE I179.



AR. Stater. Ba'al/Zeus type. Susa? № GMV 7511 II  
 Obv. Ba'al enthroned l., holding sceptre, dotted border.  
 Rev. Lion advancing l., dotted border.  
 Obverse control: none.  
 Reverse control (in ex.): non-visible.  
 Symbol (rev. above lion): spearhead.  
 16,82 gr.; ø 23–24 mm; 4.  
 Reference: Nicolette-Piere 2.



AR. Eighth stater. After 312 BC. Babylon.

Obv. Ba'al enthroned l., holding sceptre.

Rev. Lion advancing l., head reverted, dotted border invisible.

Obverse control: none

Reverse control:  (?)

Symbol (rev. above lion): anchor l.

1,46 gr.; ø 11–12 mm; 9.

Reference: the closest type - SC 90 or 91.

### A tetradrachm of Alexander Balas

As it was noted above, the first coin was minted under Alexander Balas (150-145 BC). This item comes from the collection of HSM, but, unfortunately, its initial provenance is unknown. The coin type, the legend as well as the style, composition and iconography allow us to attribute it without any doubts to the coinage of Antioch-on-the-Orontes<sup>3</sup>. Zeus Nikephoros displayed on the reverse was widely struck at Antioch after Antiochos IV. This type also served as a dominant silver reverse image under Alexander Balas<sup>4</sup>. Metrological data seem to attribute this item to the Antioch production. More information can be provided by the date, placed in the exergue of the reverse image. This date ΕΞΡ – 165 SE or 148/7 BC most commonly appears on the coins of Alexander Balas issued by the mint of Antioch. On the other hand, this very date never accompanies the reverse control, which this tetradrachm bears.

However, even being attributed with a certain degree of accuracy to the production of the mint of Antioch, the interest arises in interpretation of that mintmark placed in the inner left field of the reverse. What first attracts attention is that in terms of design the mintmark is a combination of three elements: a loop, a knot and four band ends. It is important to note, that such an image is atypical for Seleukid iconography and has no analogues from Seleukid coinage. On Hellenistic coins the controls - symbols and monograms - were one of the most significant indicators to



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<sup>3</sup> SC. Nos. 1784.2.

<sup>4</sup> From 109 known emission of tetradrachms struck at Antioch 106 belong to the “Zeus Nikephoros” type.

localize the emission. The controls could also serve as a main indicator to distinguish successive emissions of coins. Along with the monograms, which represent the names of responsible officials, the non-dynastic symbols most likely represent mint administrators, die-crafter (or college of crafters), who were responsible for emission. The mintmark appeared on coins as a subsidiary element and a small-sized individual image, in most cases, semantically not associated with the main motif of the reverse. These symbols could have been associated with a concrete mint. A very striking example is widely known “horse head”, which was used as a mintmark on the coins issued by the mint of Ecbatana. On the other hand, many Seleukid mints continued to employ the changeable symbols, as for Antioch, Seleukeia-on-the-Tigris and other large trade centers.

The presented mintmark is totally unknown not only from the Seleukid mints, but also more widely from Hellenistic coinage. In fact, we are dealing with previously unknown symbol, which not only makes this specimen a unique example of an unknown emission, but also improves our knowledges about Hellenistic controls and technical marking. Nevertheless, it should be admitted that the interpretation of this mintmark causes a number of difficulties and does not have a single possible solution. The impossibility of associating this mintmark with any real object seriously puzzles our interpretation. The probability of schematization and to some extent simplification of the image should be completely struck off for the following reasons. Firstly, taking into account the high professionalism of a die-crafter it is almost impossible to assume the simplification of only one of the elements of the composition. Secondly, coin mintmarks were usually depicted as clearly as possible to avoid ambiguity or misinterpretations, which was the key purpose of the technical marking as such.

The atypicalness of the symbol and lack of close analogues could have seriously questioned the authenticity of the coin itself. Moreover, there are some known cases of ancient imitations of tetradrachms of Alexander Balas struck at Antioch<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, this mintmark could somehow resemble the monogram  employed by several eastern mints including Antioch<sup>6</sup>. And yet, it is clear even at first sight that the exquisite workmanship of the die-crafter, the skill and high degree of professionalism make the imitation practically impossible. Furthermore, if we accept this explanation of imitation, the obvious-cut stylistic conflict between main reverse image and the mintmark itself it would be clear. In other words, if the mintmark in question was no more but only an imitation of the monogram , then the cutter should have copied it without distinction between letters, which would have inevitably provoked the general stylistic degradation of whole image. However, at the same time the coin legend has no defects or graphical errors. All this, along with the metrological

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<sup>5</sup> SC. Nos. 1797.

<sup>6</sup> For Antioch see: SC. Nos. 1782.2; for other eastern Seleukid mints: SC. Nos. 1898, 1996, 2055.

data indicates rather the original nature of the coin, which makes this tetradrachm a first and still unique example of previously unknown emission of 148/7 BC.

### **A ‘lion stater’ from the State Museum of Oriental Art**

The two other specimens (№ 2 and №3) are held in the collections of two museums – the State Historical Museum and the State Museum of Oriental Art in Moscow. One of them (№2) is a stater, which was purchased by the State Museum of Oriental Art in the mid-1980s from a private collection but lacks a more detailed provenance. It was preliminary published, unfortunately, with a wrong attribution. The second (№3) is kept by the State Historical Museum and its provenance is totally unknown. This item is very interesting particularly for weight studies – the weight of this coin is equal to an eighth stater that is very rare in Hellenistic numismatics. It was never attributed and published before. Additionally, both coins have a very interesting reverse controls that require additional commentary.

The “Ba’al/Zeus” type or “lion stater” has traditionally received great scholarly attention<sup>7</sup>. It is commonly believed, that Persian satrap of Babylon Mazaeus firstly introduced this type soon after the city fell under Macedonian control in 331 BC. Mazaeus’ issues were distinctively featured with the Aramaic legend (while the latest issues were anepigraphic) and some stylistic nuances<sup>8</sup>. After Mazaeus’ death in 328 BC the issuing of these coins did not cease and lasted until the reign of the Seleukid king Antiochos I. The “lion staters” type presents a number of prominent stylistic features, which differentiate it from the most of the other early Hellenistic coins. Most remarkable is the locality of these emissions. E.T. Newell drew attention to the low and erratic weights obviously based on non-Attic standards<sup>9</sup>. From this, most scholars reach an agreement that the ‘lion staters’ were struck on local standards: in Babylonia on shekel, in Iran on daric<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, the coin hoard evidence suggests the local circulation of the ‘lion staters’ (Babylonia and Mesopotamia). Under this circumstance, the “Ba’al/Zeus” coinage could be regarded as distinctive satrapal emission traced back to the Persian practice. The Aramaic legend with the name of Mazaeus on early “lion staters” and adopting of local weight standards seem to confirm this suggestion.

The corpus of attested “lion staters” is characterized by many variations. In terms of typology, we can distinguish three large groups. The first group contains the issues with the name of Mazaeus, and the second bears Seleukid dynastic symbols – an anchor and undoubtedly dates from the reign of Seleukos I. More problematic is

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<sup>7</sup> IMHOOF-BLUMER 1895; ESM 261-282; LE RIDER 1972: 1-7; MØRKHOLM 1991: 48; PRICE 1991: 63-72; GOLENKO 1991: 100-117.

<sup>8</sup> NICOLET-PIERRE 1999: Nos. M1-M7.

<sup>9</sup> ESM P. 105. See also: GOLENKO 1991: 102-104; GOLENKO 1993: 109.

<sup>10</sup> It worth to note, that the name “lion staters” derives from the Babylonian cuneiform tradition and hardly somehow refers to the real weight measures.

the attribution of the third group, which contains the coins marked by non-dynastic symbols: bee, thunderbolt, pentalpha, various monograms etc.

Many scholars traditionally date “lion staters” to a short period from the death of Mazaeus in 328 BC until the second satrapy of Seleukos in Babylonia in 311 BC. However, the variety of reverse controls allows us to arrange all the non-Mazaeus and non-Seleukid coinage into several subgroups. In this way, E. Nicolet-Pierre divided all pre-Seleukid and non-Mazaeus “lion staters” into 19 subgroups<sup>11</sup>. For Nicolet-Pierre, each group was corresponded with concrete period: №№ 1-8 – after 328 BC and №№ 9-19 – 322-312 BC. Apparently, for some reasons this arrangement does not seem to be overly exhaustive. In particular, the main criterion for the classification was only control linkage, while metrological data were not taken into consideration at all<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, the total number of “lion staters” used for these statistics does not seem to be sufficiently representative for the classification proposed. A very striking example of the incompleteness of this arrangement was the publication in 2007 by P. Iossif and C. Lorber of the coin hoard of 2001, represented 145 “lion staters”, including 39 pre-Seleukid coins. Based on the analysis of this hoard, P. Iossif and C. Lorber corrected the arrangement of E. Nicolet-Pierre and specified the chronological attribution of some of the subgroups<sup>13</sup>.

According to E. Nicolet-Pierre, the present item (№2) belongs to the second subgroup, which is featured by the symbol (spearhead) on the reverse. This issue dates from 328 to 322 BC. It should be noted that this subgroup is not numerous and the coin in question is, in fact, only fifth specimen known. Interestingly, none of the recorded coin hoards includes coins with spearhead<sup>14</sup>. This fact might wrongly lead to the tentative suggestion of a late issuing of the group with spearhead control. However, this emission is not the only type for which coins are not known from the hoards. Therefore the most likely argument is rather for the non-significant volumes of the emission, instead of for the late chronology. Metrological data show stable weight of the coins of this subgroup in the interval from 17.05 to 16.38 gr. (medium 16.73), in contrast to the erratic weights of other subgroups: on average from 17 to 14 gr. The present item goes well within this statistical range<sup>15</sup>.

The iconography of the group with spearhead undoubtedly deserves particular attention. The motif of Ba'al/Zeus undoubtedly was rooted in archaic imagery of the deity seated on throne. One of the most illustrative examples of that iconography is

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<sup>11</sup> NICOLET-PIERRE 1999: 289-295.

<sup>12</sup> It seems E. Nicolet-Pierre had no more than one hundred of specimens at disposal; meanwhile, she left beyond the research on all of the Seleukid “lion staters”.

<sup>13</sup> IOSSIF, LORBER 2007.

<sup>14</sup> There are five hoards known which contain “lion staters”: Hillah 1953 (IGCH 1752), Babylonia 1954 (IGCH 1753), Abu Qubur 1987-1988, Iraq 1973 and the commerce hoard of 2001 published by Iossif and Lorber.

<sup>15</sup> However, in all fairness, we must confess, that the small number of known specimens of this series (only five items) makes these statistics ill-representative.

the coinage of city Myriandrus in Cilicia, where the motif of seated local deity Ba'al-tarsus (Ba'al of Tarsus) was widely employed. Since the Hellenistic period, the imagery of a seated male god holding an eagle (or in some cases a victorious female goddess) became one of the most recognizable model for reverse types.

For many scholars, the analysis of the obverse clearly reveals some stylistic evolution of the image of Ba'al. On the Mazaeus' issues, the figure of Ba'al was depicted with some stylistic features: paralleled legs, draped left hand with bent elbow, the right hand straight resting on the sceptre.



(BM Nos. 1988.1125.2)



(SMB 18207749)

Later on, the iconography of Ba'al was slightly modified: the legs were depicted crossed, the left hand naked resting on throne, the right hand bent in the elbow with wrist grappled the sceptre. However, it should be remembered that on the Mazaeus' coins, issued during his satrapy in Cilicia, the figure of Ba'al was usually displayed naked with bent right hand<sup>16</sup>. What is more, we have at disposal the coins of Persian satrap Pharnabazus, issued in Cilicia as well, where Ba'al was depicted draped with straight right hand<sup>17</sup>. In this way, it could be concluded that both stylistic patterns were in use even before Alexander's "lion staters", what seriously questions the point of the iconographic evolution.

Nevertheless, this subgroup remarkably presents two different stylistic patterns that undoubtedly suggested to transition from one iconographic model to another. The main reason for these changes is unclear, but likely, the transition in iconography could be caused by the political changes in the governance of the satrapy. During early Hellenistic period, the power over Babylonia passed from one ruler to another for several times. According to Arrian<sup>18</sup>, after death of Mazaeus in 328 BC a Persian noble Stamen was appointed as a new satrap of Babylonia. Some years later he was followed by Archon, who was in power till conference in Triparadeisus in 320 BC,

<sup>16</sup> SNG Paris. Nos. 350.

<sup>17</sup> BODZEK, ROMANOWSKI :2017: 44.

<sup>18</sup> Arr. *Anab.* IV. 18. 3.

when Seleukos became a new governor of Babylon. In 315 Antigonos forced Seleukos to flee the satrapy and became a new ruler of the “upper satrapies”. However, Seleukos, supported by satrap of Egypt Ptolemy, entered the war against Antigonos and his son Demetrios. As a result, Seleukos finally managed to recover his lost territories and create his own kingdom<sup>19</sup>. It remains unclear, which of these rulers could have potentially introduced the new stylistic pattern on the “lion staters”.

Determining the date and location of the emission of “lion staters” with spearhead is problematic. Many scholars conventionally regarded Babylon as a key mint issued “lion staters” between 328 and 312 BC, mainly due to the enormous volume of the production. However, the Babylonian workshop, despite its role in local currency, does not seem to be monopolist in this field. It is well known from later Seleukid coinage that the ‘lion staters’ were issued by mints of Ecbatana, Seleukeia-on-the-Tigris and Susa<sup>20</sup>. In contrast, Babylonian emissions were struck on local Babylonian weight standards, while emissions of Susa and Ecbatana were based on native Iranian daric standard. There is no doubt that the mint of Susa operated under Alexander and his Successors<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, a royal treasury had remained in Susa, which was of a great political and economic importance during the wars of the Diadochi. Furthermore, the only recorded findspot for a “Ba’al/Zeus” with spearhead is Susa: surprisingly, a bronze was unearthed in the Susa excavations<sup>22</sup>.

The analysis of iconography could shed some light on this matter. Firstly, despite the prevalence of the spearhead as a symbol, it was very often employed by the mint of Susa<sup>23</sup>. It becomes clear from the early Seleukid coinage that most coins struck at Susa bore this symbol. Undoubtedly, the spearhead was not a “brand label” of Susa, but it was very popular during early Hellenistic period. However, the spearhead on the Susa coins is directed right, while the spearhead on the “lion staters” is directed left. This stylistic nuance complicates the problem. Secondly, there are two patterns to the position of the lion’s tail: waves behind the body and between the legs. The first position is quite rare. The analysis of the early Seleukid coinage reveals that the second pattern was employed by the Babylonian mint, while the first by Susa<sup>24</sup>. The coin in question is of the first type.

The detailed attribution of the emission of “lion staters” marked by spearhead, remains highly problematic mainly because of the lack of the archeological data and the small number of known specimens. Babylon could not be wholeheartedly considered as a mint of this emission. The total absence of the coins of this series

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<sup>19</sup> BOIY 2004: 108-109; HECKEL 2006: 255.

<sup>20</sup> Ecbatana: SC. Nos. 220; Seleukeia-on-the-Tigris: SC. Nos. 144; Susa: SC. Nos. 184-186.

<sup>21</sup> KRITT 1997: 25.

<sup>22</sup> LE RIDER 1963: Nos. 238.

<sup>23</sup> KRITT 1997: 25.

<sup>24</sup> SC. Nos. 184-186; KRITT 1997: Pt. 31.





in the hoards makes the chronological study almost impossible and does not allow us to shrink the time gaps to less than the period between 328 and 311 BC.

### A “lion stater” from the State Historical Museum

The third coin (№3) is a rare small silver of the “Ba'al/Zeus“ type. It shares many of the characteristics of the second coin. This item with unknown provenance is kept by the State Historical Museum and has never come under research and published before. This specimen has a close stylistic affinity to SC 90 or 91, but like №1, it belongs to an unknown emission and needs to be attributed with due caution.

As it was noted in introduction, №2 and №3 are of similar type but seriously differ from each other firstly in weight, style, and fabric. The issues of “lion staters” of such low weight (1.46 gr.) are known from the production of several mints: Babylon, Susa and Ecbatana<sup>25</sup>. The low weight of these coins conforms to the hemitetarte or eighth stater. The weight of the present item is lower than the average one of the recorded emissions, mainly due to the poor preservation of the coin. Like other local-oriented “lion staters”, the small silver coins of this type should have been somehow integrated in local circulation, plausibly based on the native standards. In general, it was the common practice for early Hellenistic coinage to issue such small silver fractions. However, the volumes of this production were hardly numerous.

The iconography of this specimen deserves special note. “Ba'al/Zeus” depicted on the reverse stylistically corresponds with the second iconographic pattern of this type: crossed legs and nude left hand. This could suggest a late issuing. The anchor (dynastic Seleukid symbol) reliably attributes this series to Seleukos I. What attracts more attention is the iconography of the lion. In most cases, the lion held the head up, and only on few issues, was it depicted with reverted head. This notable stylistic feature appears to offer some information about the mint. The detailed analysis of the early Seleukid iconography reveals that only a Babylonian mint (Babylon II, according to Houghton and Lorber) produced the small silver of this type with reverted lion head on reverse<sup>26</sup>. However, the monogram, preserved on the reverse, questions the sure attribution to the Babylonian production. Unfortunately, because of the poor preservation (the low edge of the coin is highly worn and damaged) the monogram is only partly readable. In fact, there is only upper part of the monogram, which could be to some degree reconstructed as Greek M  with some possible variations of low part. This monogram never appears on the Babylonian issues of this weight. As an alternative,  was employed by Susa on the hemitetartes of this type<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Babylon: SC. Nos. 90; Susa: SC. Nos. 186; Ecbatana: SC. Nos. 221.

<sup>26</sup> SC. Nos. 89–91.

<sup>27</sup> See: Seleucid Coins Online. V2 669.

Despite all problems concerning the mint, this item increases our knowledge of various nuances of the 'Ba'al/Zeus' type and offers new material for future discussion.

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### **Summary**

#### A Note on Three Hellenistic Coins from the Collections of Russian Museums

This study deals with three rare Hellenistic coins kept by two Russian museums: the State Historical Museum and the State Museum of Oriental Art. All specimens are of a great numismatic interest, firstly, because they belong to rare or previously unknown issues.

**Keywords:** Seleukids, iconography, Hellenism, numismatics, mintmark, Antioch