

ROGER BLAND, *The Coinage of Gordian III from the Mints of Antioch and Caesarea* (London: The Royal Numismatic Society Special Publication no. 60: 2023). 529 pages and 100 plates, ISBN: 0-901405-39-6.

This volume is the latest in a series of publications about the coinage of Roman Syria, such as M. and K. Prieur, *A Type Corpus of the Syro-Phoenician Tetradrachms and their Fractions from 57 BC to AD 253* (Lancaster and London, 2000), K. Butcher, *Coinage in Roman Syria* (London, 2004), R. McAlee, *The Coins of Roman Antioch* (Lancaster and London, 2007), K. M. Neumann, *Antioch in Syria. A History from Coins* (300 BCE – 450 CE) (Cambridge, 2021), as well as relevant volumes of the *Roman Provincial Coinage* series (namely volumes I, II, III, VII.2, and IX). The latest *RPC* volume, *RPC VII.2*, published in 2022, covers the same period as the book under review here and Bland also contributed to it for the sections pertaining to Caesarea and Antioch.¹

While the publications referred to focus on Syrian coinage and pertain mostly to provincial issues, Bland extends his approach to encompass the entire production of the two mints producing silver in the East of the Empire at the time besides Egypt, i.e. Antioch in Syria and Caesarea in Cappadocia. The reign of Gordian III (AD 238–244) sees the opening of a new imperial mint at Antioch, producing for the first time antoniniani (also termed ‘radiates’) outside of Rome. Some aurei might also have been minted there, though there are still some doubts on their authenticity (see pp. 55 and 243–5). In parallel, Antioch resumes the minting of provincial tetradrachms, interrupted in the East since Elagabalus (AD 218–22), though no bronze is produced under Gordian. As for Caesarea in Cappadocia, it also resumed silver production, interrupted since Macrinus in AD 217, with a range of silver denominations (tridrachms, didrachms, and drachms) alongside various modules of bronzes. After Gordian’s reign, production of coinage stops at Caesarea, but continues at Antioch, where tetradrachms and provincial bronzes are still made until AD 253, after which only Roman antoniniani were produced.

The period studied here therefore represents a major step in the transformation of the currency of the eastern Empire, shifting from silver and bronze coinages with Greek legends to imperial denominations. In parallel, imperial silver currency also sees a major change, as the antoniniani, revived in AD 238 and produced from then on in ever larger numbers, came to replace the denarius. By focussing on both provincial

¹ J. Mairat and M. Spoerri Butcher, with contributions by M. Amandry, R. Bland, K. Butcher, J. Nurpetlian, and U. Peter, *Roman Provincial Coinage VII.2. From Gordian I to Gordian III (AD 238–244): all provinces except Asia* (London and Paris, 2022).

and imperial series, too often studied separately, Bland gives a holistic view of these transformations, taking also into account aspects relating to coin circulation in the Eastern Empire, through the evidence of hoards.

Historically, Gordian's reign witnessed major external threats at the frontiers of the Empire, notably in the east, where the Sasanians started to pursue a much more offensive strategy. This resulted in a possible first voyage of the emperor to Antioch at the start of AD 239. An expedition against the Sasanians was then launched in AD 242, with the troops gathering in the Balkans before heading to Syria and Mesopotamia. Gordian III died during this campaign in early AD 244 and the Roman troops were defeated by the Sasanians.

Bland's volume can be divided into several sections. After a short introduction (Chapter 1, pp. 1-18) and an overview of various chronological reference points relating to the dating of the coinages studied (Chapter 2, pp. 19-24), Bland discusses the coinage produced at Antioch, in chronological order of the various imperial and provincial issues (Chapter 3, pp. 25-137: Antioch, the first series of radiates; Chapter 4, pp. 139-207: Antioch, the tetradrachms; Chapter 5, pp. 209-276: Antioch, the second series of radiates). The catalogue of these coinages is embedded in each chapter, with a separate numbering by type for each of them. Obverse and reverse dies have also their own numbering for each chapter, subdivided by series for the tetradrachms, or bust type and reverse type for the second series of radiates. The following chapter (Chapter 6, pp. 277-422) examines the silver and bronze coinage made at Caesarea in Cappadocia. Here, the catalogue is arranged by year of issue, presenting for each first the silver (tridrachms, didrachms, and drachms) and then the bronze (termed AE2, AE3, and AE4, see below). Numbering is again continuous, but dies follow their own sequence using Roman numerals this time. Subsequent chapters look at the relationship between the various coinages (Chapter 7, pp. 423-440: Analyses and metrology), their areas of circulation (Chapter 8, pp. 441-488: Coin circulation), and their connections with historical events and the light they can shed on these (Chapter 9: The historical events of Gordian's reign, pp. 489-506). A final chapter draws the main conclusions of this study together (Chapter 10: The significance of Gordian's coinage from Antioch and Caesarea, pp. 507-512). The volume concludes with a list of sources consulted, collections, finds (hoards and site finds), and a general bibliography (pp. 513-528), as well as 98 plates. These plates present all obverse and reverse dies described in the catalogue at enlarged scale in order to facilitate their identification (p. viii), while in text illustrations provided for each catalogue entry reproduce all coins at the traditional 1:1 scale.

As Bland states in his introduction (p. vii), this volume has been a long time in the making, being the revised publication of a PhD completed at University College London in 1991.² Only the issues of Caesarea in Cappadocia had been published, in two articles, in 1991 (silver) and 1996 (bronze).³ In the interval, the material available through sales catalogues grew exponentially, which meant that the catalogue and the die study had to be updated accordingly. The overall order of the increase is roughly fourfold, with 1451 coins recorded in 1991 and 5396 included in the present volume (p. 7, Table 1). The largest increase can be noted for the silver of Caesarea (+590%, see also pp. 282-283), followed by the Antiochene tetradrachms (+560%, see also pp. 142-143). It should however be noted that the most frequent types belonging to issue II of the second series of antoniniani made at Antioch were not updated (p. 232), precisely because of their commonness. Bland's study also drew on additional recent catalogues, such as B. Michaux, *Le monnayage imperial de Gordien III (238-244 après J.-C.)* (Brussels, 2020) and T. Ganschow, *Münzen von Kappadokien. Sammlung Henseler* (Antalya, 2018), both referenced for each entry in the relevant sections of the catalogue, next to standard corpora such as *RIC* and *RPC*.

The chapters dedicated to Antioch present an in depth discussion of the two series of antoniniani (dated AD 238-239 and AD 242-244) and the four series of tetradrachms (dated AD 238-40, AD 241, 242-244) issued by the mint. There is a strong presumption that the first series of antoniniani might have coincided with a voyage of Gordian III to Antioch, early in AD 239, given the presence of numerous reverse types relating to the emperor himself, though the historical evidence around this has been much debated (see pp. 55-56 and Chapter 9, pp. 492-498).⁴ As for the second series of antoniniani, it was probably not struck before the emperor's arrival in Antioch in late AD 242 on his way to fight the Sasanians in Mesopotamia, exemplifying the close connection between minting activity and imperial voyages, troop movements, and/or military pay. A major achievement is certainly to have laid out the differences between the antoniniani struck in Rome and the ones made in Antioch, as coins of the first series often share similar reverse types to the ones of Rome (Table 1, pp. 27-29). Mint attribution is also discussed in detail, as

² Available online at https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10116536/1/Bland_thesis.pdf (consulted 19 April 2024).

³ R. Bland, 'The last coinage of Caesarea in Cappadocia', in R. Martini *et al.* (eds), *Ermanno A. Arslan Studia Dicata I* (Milan, 1991), pp. 213-258; R. Bland, 'The bronze coinage of Gordian III from Caesarea in Cappadocia', in R. Ashton (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Coinage from Turkey* (Ankara, 1996), pp. 49-96.

⁴ See also R. Bland, 'An imperial visit to Antioch in AD 239. The numismatic evidence', in L. Bricault, A. Burnett, V. Drost, and A. Suspène (eds), *Rome et les provinces. Monnayages et histoire. Mélanges offerts à Michel Amandry* (Bordeaux, 2017), pp. 351-365.

previous scholars had sometimes assigned these coins to the Balkans. Find analysis and the sheer scale of production however make Antioch a much better contender. An estimate of the production of these two issues, based on the obverse die analysis, reveals that the second series was by far more abundant than the first one, amounting to an average estimate of 4,529 obverse dies and 90.6 million coins, compared to 1,566 obverse dies and 31.3 million coins for the first series (Table 1, p. 509). This puts things into an interesting perspective, as the production of the tetradrachms was done on a much smaller scale. Indeed, all four series combined, the estimated average number of obverse dies amounts to only 549 and the corresponding number of coins estimated at 8.2 million (Table 1, p. 509). Though the tetradrachms cannot be dated as precisely as the antoniniani, it seems that they were mainly minted in between the two series of antoniniani, with production in AD 241 (series 2) being extremely low. Here too, output differed from series to series, with series 1 having the highest estimated count of obverse dies (341 dies), followed by series 3 (194 dies). These differences and the alternated minting patterns raise the question of the purpose of this currency that obviously was not intended as military pay, but probably rather catered for the needs in silver currency within the wider Syrian area.

The coinage produced at Caesarea in Cappadocia yet presents a different pattern. Issues are dated according to regnal years, with silver produced in years 3 (AD 240), 4 (AD 241), and 5 (AD 242), while bronze was made in years 3 (AD 240), 4 (AD 241), 6 (AD 243) and 7 (AD 244). Here too, output varied according to issues (Fig. 1, below), with the silver produced in year 4 outnumbering all others years by far (pp. 301-302, Fig. 17), but still falling short of the scale observed for Antioch, with an average estimate of 'only' 1,281 obverse dies for 25.6 million coins (p. 509, Table 1). Survival rates turn out to be lower for the silver than for the bronze, especially for the tridrachms (year 3 and 4) and the didrachms (year 3, 4, and 5), meaning that we have at present only an incomplete picture of the coinage actually made in Caesarea (pp. 298-301), while this is not the case for Antioch. Symptomatic of this situation is a coin that has come to light in January 2024.⁵ This tridrachm of year 3 depicts indeed a reverse type so far unknown for Gordian III, showing the deity Artemis as huntress with an image of the Mount Argaeus next to her. While the Mount Argaeus is ubiquitous on Caesarea's silver coinage from year 4 onwards, a more diversified range is used for year 3 (AD 240) that includes agonistic crowns advertising oecumenical games in honour of the emperor (ΓΟΠΑΙΑΝΙ ΟΙΚΟΥ) and two towers that were possibly part of the city's fortifications. If games were held in year 240, it is not impossible that the

⁵ Now catalogued as *RPC* VII.2, 3225A, see <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/type/90500> (consulted 3 July 2024).

small issue of silver of that year was made for that occasion. The purpose of the extremely large silver coinage made in the following year 4 (AD 241), consisting mainly of tridrachms and drachms, must have catered for different needs. Finds of these coins are rare, but Caesarean silver certainly did not circulate within Syria and cannot, also for chronological reasons, be associated with the needs of the Roman army campaigning the Sasanians. Until Caracalla, Cappadocian silver is found in relatively large numbers in Colchis, though for Gordian III, evidence is so far patchy at best, except for a few rare specimens (pp. 479–481).⁶

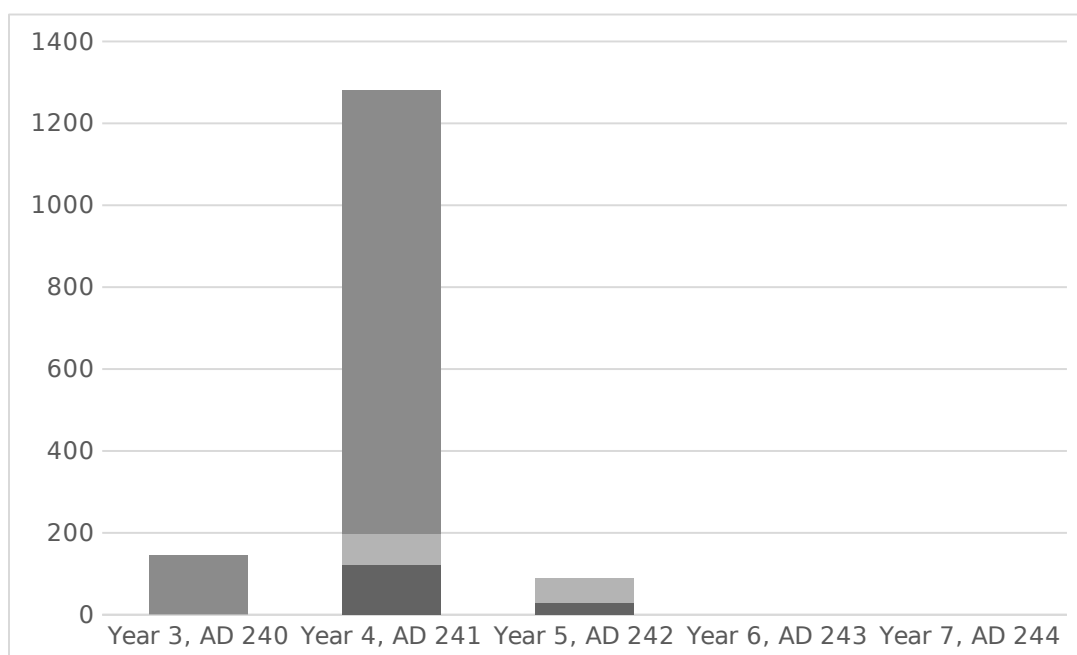


Fig. 1. Silver production at Caesarea in Cappadocia per regnal year. Average estimate of the number of obverse dies, after Bland, Table 5, p. 295.

⁶ To the one listed in Bland, p. 481 (a drachm found at Pityus), a second specimen (a didrachm, year 5) from the Roman fort at Apsaros can now be added, see P. Jaworski, R. Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, and Sh. Mamuladze, 'The rise and fall of the Roman fort in Apsaros: recent numismatic evidence', *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean* 30/2 (2021), pp. 289–306, at p. 301, Fig. 9,1.

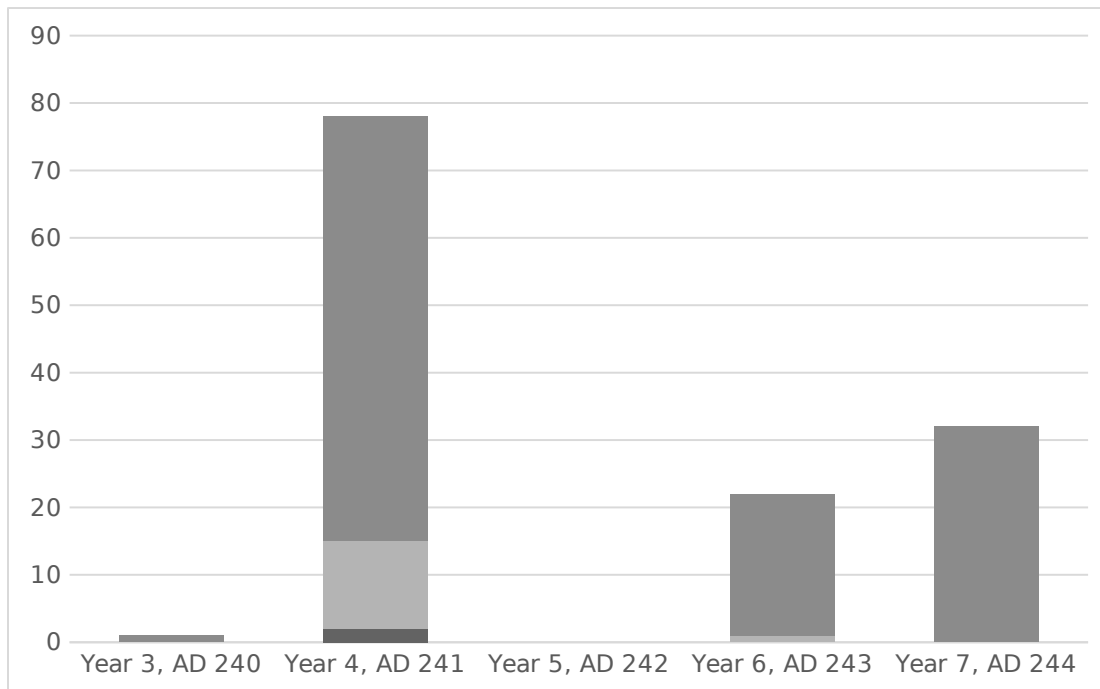


Fig. 2. Bronze production at Caesarea in Cappadocia per regnal year. Average estimate of the number of obverse dies, after Bland, Table 5, p. 295.

Next to silver, Caesarea also produced a range of bronze denominations, termed as AE 2, AE 3, and AE 4 (pp. 310–312). Interestingly, their production also peaks in year 4, but unlike the silver, continues in years 6 and 7 (Fig. 2). Average weights and modules are as follow:

AE 2 : 24–25 mm / 9–10 g

AE 3: 20–21 mm / 5–6 g

AE 4: 16 mm / 3.30 g

An correspondence with Roman denominations (as, semis, quadrans) is envisaged by Bland, on the basis of a weight similarity of the AE 2 module with the Roman as. This topic has also been discussed by A. Johnston, *Greek Imperial Denominations, ca. 200–275. A Study of the Roman Provincial Bronze Coinages of Asia Minor* (London, 2007), pp. 191–193, with Table 56, where other approximations are proposed for the three modules made under Gordian III (?dupondius, ?as, ?semis). As the Cappadocian silver relates better to the Syrian tetradrachms than the Roman coinage, Bland however concludes wisely, that ‘it is impossible to be certain’ (p. 311).⁷

The relationship of the various silver denominations (the denarius, the antoninianus, the tetradrachm, the Caesarean tridrachm, didrachm and

⁷ On the topic of provincial bronze denominations in the provinces under Gordian III, see also the discussion in *RPC VII.2*, pp. 44–55.

drachm) are detailed in an in-depth analysis, supported by a range of metal analyses (Table 5, pp. 435–440) of which some are published here for the first time (p. 424, notably 33 antoniniani,¹³ tetradrachms, and 4 silver coins of Caesarea, made available by K. Butcher and M. Ponting). Bland argues in favour of an equivalence of 1½ antoniniani for the denarius (p. 432) and also draws attention to the fact that eastern silver coinages were not necessarily baser than the ones made at Rome (p. 434). The relationship of the various silver coinages is further examined through hoarding practices, with a very comprehensive review of the evidence available for Turkey and the wider Syrian area. This allows thoughts on the fact the Syrian tetradrachms remained available for hoarding until the late third century (p. 461) and how ancient Syria became, in the second half of the third century, similar to a closed currency system in which antoniniani minted in Antioch circulated almost exclusively, to the prejudice of antoniniani from other mints (pp. 477–8). Cappadocian and Syrian provincial silver covered two different areas of circulation mutually excluding each other and were never hoarded together. However, their respective mints collaborated, as engravers from Antioch made most of the dies needed at Caesarea for the silver produced in the years 3, 4, and 5, precisely while minting activity was halted at Antioch (pp. 312–313).

These few considerations will only have highlighted some of the topics addressed in Bland's monumental publication and, more widely, the interest of this material. One is now awaiting the completion, by the same author, of the revised edition of *RIC* IV.3 (Gordian – Aemilian), which will contextualise the antoniniani minted at Antioch under Gordian in the wider setting of imperial currency.

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