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# HASMONEAN AND HERODIAN SYMBOLS ON THE ANCIENT COINS OF MAGDALA, IN GALILEE

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## **Abstract**

In Magdala during the archaeological investigations, directed by the Anahuac University from 2010 to 2017, around 2,500 coins were found in the excavated areas. A large number of the Jewish coins found in Magdala were minted in Jerusalem by the Hasmonean dynasty and the Herodian dynasty. These coins shared Jewish and Greek-Roman symbols. The symbols represented the political, ideological and social power that could have influenced the settlement during the 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE-CE.

*Keywords:* coins, Magdala, archaeology, symbols, Judaism

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## **1. Introduction**

In archaeology, the analysis and study of different materials and structures in their context offer valuable information to understand the cultural influences among different societies, their way of living, ancient technologies, historical periods, political power, economics and religion. Among these materials, the coins provide more historical information. The epigraphy, iconography and the symbols represented on the coins, express the reinforcement of the political power, the economic development and ideological movements of a particular society and their influence in certain regions.

When studying an image, the historical circumstances must be taken into account, so that coherent hypothesis to the symbolism and its meaning can be suggested. The symbols, iconography, epigraphy and architecture represented in the material culture must be understood not only as part of an aesthetic tradition, but also as part of an ideology, typical of social strategies of domination [1].

Symbols engraved on the coins grant an identity to cities, kingdoms and states by those responsible for their coinage. This identity within the symbols strengthens a feeling of belonging and cohesion of a society [2]. As an example of this, are the first ancient Greek coins (6<sup>th</sup> c. – 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE) in which the engraved symbols were emphasized the religion and mythology of their culture. The Roman coins symbolized the state as a whole [2, p. 62-67] with patterns influenced by the Hellenistic culture.

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The Hasmonean and Herodian bronze coins' type, minted in Jerusalem and circulating in Galilee, can give us a sample of the general interaction between the Jewish and the Greek-Roman symbols, accepted by the population of the region, as respectful of the Jewish religious sensibilities: "You shall not make yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything in Heaven or on Earth beneath or in the waters under the earth" (Exodus 20.4-5).

To have a better understanding of the Hellenic influence of the symbols engraved on the Jewish coins found in Magdala, it has to be taken into account the historic transition and the cultural development of the geographical area.



**Figure 1.** Pegasus on a Corinth silver drachm (AGDB, 2018).



**Figure 2.** Roman bronze sestertius, of Emperor Trajan (AGDB, 2019).

In the region of Asia Minor, the Lydian Empire had a strong Greek influence due to the geographical, commercial and Greek *poleis* development conditions. This influence was represented in the artistic and architectural expressions of the Lydian inhabitants, such as the agora found in Sardis, the Lydian capital. So far, it is the Lydian Empire to whom is attributed the minting of the first coin made of *electrum* (an alloy of gold and silver) [2] between years 650-560 BCE.

The symbols on the coins of ancient Greece emphasized the mythology, religion and identity of the *poleis* that had the economic and political power to

mint coins. The symbols engraved on those coins were the representation of gods and animals. For example, in Athens, the archaic style tetradrachm (after 449 BCE): Obv. - the bust of Athena, guard of the city, Rev. - one owl, the sacred bird of the city, with the apocope of the city ATHE. The Corinth silver drachm (Figure 1), from the Hellenistic period 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, features a Pegasus and the bust of Athena or Aphrodite (depending on the type of coin).

As regarding the Hellenistic period, the artistic expressions as sculptures and coins were focused on the image of kings as if they were gods. The coins assumed a stronger political propaganda character, under governmental control systems as it happened in the Levant region where coins were minted under the political control of the Ptolemaic (Egypt, Judea and Phoenicia) and Seleucid (Asian territories and later on Judea).

The coins of Ancient Greece and Hellenistic period “had a typology that sought to emphasize religion and mythology through an iconography that focused on deifying its rulers” [2, p. 63]. Rome adopted the use of Greek coins as a mean of economic exchange. By the time it took control over the entire Italic Peninsula, Sicily, Cartage, Levant and all the Mediterranean cities, Roman circulating coins, showed a very clear artistic Hellenic influence.

The Romans, by minting their coins, transmitted political information to all the inhabitants of the Roman Republic and later to the Empire. The figures of the Roman Imperial coins had: Obv. - portrait of the Emperor (Figure 2), Rev. - political activities as architectural projects, representation of Roman gods.

## **2. Experimental**

The ancient settlement of Magdala is located in the region of Galilee, between the Lake Kinneret (also known as Sea of Galilee) on the east side, and Mount Arbel on the west side. It is situated 5 km north of Tiberias and 10 km south of Capernaum.

The first archaeological excavations in Magdala date back to the year 1971 thanks to the Franciscan archaeologists, P. Virgilio Corbo and P. Stanislao Loffreda [3].

In 2009 the Antiquity Authority of Israel (IAA) discovered one synagogue dating back to the 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE, north of the Franciscan excavations. By the year 2010, the Anahuac University of Mexico developed an interdisciplinary archaeological project to continue the excavation of the ancient settlement of Magdala, between the Franciscan area, and the excavations carried out by the IAA. During the excavation seasons: 2010-2017, conducted by the archaeological team of the Anahuac University, six areas (Figure 3) were uncovered (5,064.99 m<sup>2</sup>): (A/F) - ritual area, (B) - domestic and storage area, (C) - production and domestic area, (D) - port area and (E) - market area.

In these six excavated areas, an average of 2,500 bronze coins from the Seleucid period to the Ottoman period were found. Only 1,197 were identified as Jewish bronze coins of the Hasmonean and Herodian dynasty. In this paper, I

focus on the Jewish coins' type of the Hasmonean and Herodian dynasty that do not have any portrait or animal figures (Table 1).

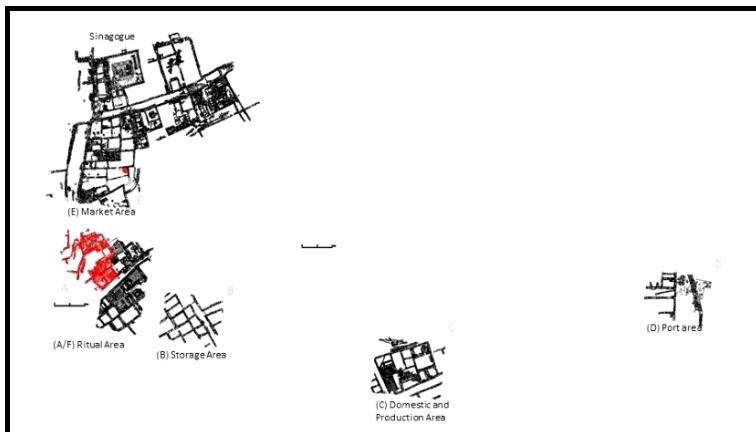
**Table 1.** Type of the Hasmonean and Herodian coins found in Magdala (seasons 2010-2017).

Group	Ruler	Date	Obverse	Reverse	Reference
<b>Hasmonean</b>	Alexander Jannaeus	104-76 BCE	Paleo-Hebrew inscription in wreath	Joined cornucopia. Pomegranate between horns.	[4] Groups P, Q, R, S.
		80-76 BCE	Anchor surrounded by inscription in Greek: (of King Alexander)	Pointed star in diadem. Between rays Paleo-Hebrew inscription (Yehonatan the King).	[4] Group K
		80-76 BCE	Anchor surrounded by circle. Around it a Greek inscription (King Alexander)	Pointed star surrounded by border of dots. Aramaic inscription (The King Alexander)	[4] Group L
<b>Herodian</b>	Herod the Great	37-4 BCE	Anchor surrounded by inscription in Greek: King Herod	Joined cornucopia. Caduceus between horns. Above five pellets.	[4, p. 222]
	Archelaus	4 BCE - 6 CE	Anchor surrounded by Greek Inscription Of Herod)	Joined cornucopia. Caduceus between horns. Inscription above.	[4, p.224]
		4 BCE - 6 CE	Vine branch with bunch of grapes and small leaf. Above inscription in Greek: of Herod.	Crested helmet with two cheeks pieces; below small caduceus. Inscription Greek (of the Ethnarch)	[4, p. 226]
	Antipas	20/1 CE	Reed. Inscription in Greek (of Herod the Tetrarch.	Inscription in wreath: Tiberias	[4, p. 226]
	Agrippa I	41//2 CE	Canopy. Inscription in Greek: Of King Agrippa	Three ears of grain issuing from between two leaves.	[4, p. 231]

All these type of coins were minted in Jerusalem, with exception of the Antipas coins, which were minted in Tiberias. These two dynasties used symbols that were common in the region after the Seleucid control and during the Roman Administration.

The Levant region was strongly influenced by fashion, style and artistic trends of the Hellenic and Roman culture between the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE and 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE.

There is evidence, through coins and Athenian pottery, of Greek influence during the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE in the southern Levant, when Judea (*Yehud*) was still a satrapy of the Persian Empire [5].



**Figure 3.** Excavated areas of Magdala. Seasons 2010-2017 (Magdala Archaeological Project, 2016).

Alexander the Great was the main diffuser of Hellenistic culture in Levant. He not only sought to conquer and control the Orient, but also Hellenised it [6]. After conquering Tyre, he controlled the entire coast up to Gaza, and then he reached Egypt where he founded the city of Alexandria. After his death the Judean region became part of the Ptolemaic administration. Then the Seleucid kingdom took control of the region and the Hellenization of the area accelerated. The Jewish population “balanced their local concerns with full participation in ‘universal’ Hellenistic culture” [7].

It is until the reign of Antiochus IV that this balance was broken after his transgressions over the Jewish beliefs. People from Jerusalem and Judean settlements were forced to adopt the Seleucid customs and transgress their Jewish beliefs. It is written in the book of the Maccabees: “The king also sent instructions (...) banning holocausts, sacrifices and libations from the sanctuary, profaning sabbaths and feasts, ·defiling the sanctuary and the sacred ministers, ·building altars precincts and shrines for idols, sacrificing pigs and unclean beasts, leaving their sons uncircumcised, and prostituting themselves to all kinds of impurity and abomination, so that they should forget the Law and revoke all observance of it.” (Maccabees 1.45-52)

The local population were losing their traditions with these persistent transgressions. To avoid this, the conservative Jews started the Maccabean rebellion against the Seleucid. The use of symbols became more rigorous after the Maccabees victory and the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty. However, they were not able to get rid of the Hellenistic artistic influence. Military accomplishments were significant characteristics of the Hasmonean dynasty during the first rulers [8]. These victories were expressed on their Royal Hasmonean tombs, which maintained the characteristics of the Hellenistic

funerary monuments. The Royal Hasmonean tombs in Modi'in are an example of this artistic and architectural influence in the region [8].

### 3. Results and discussion

Besides the architectural patterns and sculptures, coins were part of the Hellenic and Roman artistic influence on the Jewish creative expressions. The Hasmonean and Herodian coins shared the Greco-Roman symbols, keeping the strictness of the Jewish law of refraining from the representations of humans or animals.

Hyrcanus I was the first Hasmonean king in minting Jewish coins between the years 128-127 BCE [9]. His coins had Paleo-Hebrew and military motifs which were used in the Hellenistic culture, such as crested helmet, cornucopia, palm branch with one small ribbon tied at the top. This last symbol is well known as a Greek victory symbol [4, 7].

These are the symbols used by the Hasmonean and Herodian dynasties in their bronze coins, which were found in Magdala.

- Crested helmet - This symbol depicted the leadership and authority of the ruling dynasty. The Hasmonean coin of Hyrcanus I ([4] H1) has the design of a Hellenistic crested helmet. This design was used in the contemporary coinage of the Seleucid dynasty. The Herodian coins of Herod the Great [4, p. 221] and Archelaus [4, p. 226] have the motif of a crested helmet with cheek pieces (Figure 4).
- Lily flower - This symbol adorned different king's palaces and public buildings in Judea, such as the Temple of Salomon [9]. The design of this lily flower was taken from the Phoenicians. This symbol was also current in the coins of the Seleucid king Antiochus VII. During the Hasmonean period, it was already an important symbol, used in different artistic expressions. Hyrcanus I ([4] groups C and I) and Alexander Jannaeus ([4] group O). Ya'akov Meshorer suggests that for the Early Roman period, the lily flower was the symbol of the people of Israel.
- Anchor - In the Hellenistic ideology, this symbol represented the aspiration to reach a good and safe destination. According to Meshorer, Alexander Jannaeus ([4] groups K, L, M, N), the youngest son of Hyrcanus I, used the anchor as a symbol of conquest when he added to the Hasmonean kingdom all the coastal cities, from Akko in the north, to Gaza in the south, (excluding the city of Ashkelon) in 95 BCE [4, 10]. As for the Early Roman period, Herod the Great [4, p. 222-223] kept using the anchor symbol (Figure 5), but now to possibly commemorate the founding of the Caesarea's harbour and the economic and political strengthening with Rome through the maritime routes [4]. After Herod, his son Archelaus also used the anchor symbol in his coins [4, p. 224] minted in Jerusalem, and Agrippa I [4, p. 232] in the mint of Caesarea.
- Galley - This is another maritime symbol used to celebrate maritime events, such as the coins of Herod the Great [4, p. 223] and Archelaus [4, p. 225].

Rome started to mint different maritime symbols, as the galley or the anchor, to celebrate maritime achievements.

- Star - In the Hellenistic culture the star, or the ‘sun wheel’, was a symbol associated with luck, fate and astrology. Macedonian shields had this symbol. When Alexander Jannaeus, of the Hasmonean dynasty, took the star as a Jewish symbol (Figure 6), he modified its meaning into a royal symbol: his bronze coins ([4] groups K, L) had the star always surrounded by a diadem or a border of dots which represented the strip of gold used by kings [4]. For him it was important to express his status as a king, so in his coins appeared, between the rays of the star (the image he used as self-representation), the inscription: Yehonatan the King ([4] group K). The meaning of the diadem and the border of dots, as a strip of gold, was also taken up by Herod in his coins with the anchor type.
- The Wreath - In the Hellenistic culture, the wreath symbolized the victory, loyalty, dedication, memory and transition to eternal life. The circular shape of the wreath has two meanings [11]: eternity (perfection, integrity and fullness); status and achievements of a person, demonstration of sovereignty. The wreath represented the leadership, victory and authority of a ruler in the Greek-Roman and Jewish culture [4]. On the other hand, the wreath within the Judaism it is referred to wisdom (Figure 7), or so it is represented in the book of Proverbs which is directly identified with Solomon: “The beginning of wisdom? The acquisition of wisdom; at all costs of all you have, acquire perception. Hold her close, and she will make you great; embrace her, and she will be your pride; she will set a crown of grace on your head, present you with a glorious diadem.” (Proverbs 4.7-9)
- Reed - This symbol was used in Antipas’ coins [4, p. 226], as a representation of the vegetation that grew on the banks of lakes, rivers, springs or water bodies. Meshorer mentioned that the reed was probably used as a characteristic of these currencies to represent the new and stable capital of Galilee, Tiberias, which was founded around year 19 CE [4]. This type of vegetation is still found on the shores of the Lake Kinneret.
- Palm Branch - For the Greek culture this symbol represented the victory. Athenian, Seleucid and Roman coins had it engraved. In the 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE [7] the Hasmonean rulers Hyrcanus I and Jannaeus started to use this symbol too, Meshorer mentioned that probably they used it as one of the Four Species of the Sukkot [9], but it is uncertain. In Galilee, during the 1<sup>st</sup>. c. CE, Antipas used this symbol in his coins minted in Tiberias [4, p. 226, 228]. A formulated hypothesis considers that this symbol could mark the transition of the beginning of Tiberias (reed) to a more consolidated city (palm branch), [4, 12].
- Cornucopia - It symbolized abundance. There are several versions about this symbol in the Hellenistic culture. According to Meshorer, this horn was a characteristic attribute of Demeter, goddess of the earth and fertility in Greek mythology, on the other hand, the Romans associated it with a myth of Jupiter [4, 7, 13]. The Hasmonean dynasty minted coins with the cornucopia

and joined cornucopia facing one another with a pomegranate in between. The joined cornucopia style with the pomegranate was an original Hasmonean designed ([4] groups A, B, D, E, F, I, P, Q, R, S, T, U) symbolizing the ‘fruit of victory’. The pomegranate was the representation of stability and greatness of the Jewish people. The Herodian coins [4, p. 223-224] style, kept using the joined cornucopia, but they replaced the pomegranate with a roman caduceus between horns (Figure 8).



**Figure 4.** Helmet symbol in Archelaus bronze coin (4 BCE – 6 CE) (AGDB, 2019).



**Figure 5.** Two examples of anchor symbol. Jannaeus bronze coin (left) and Herod bronze coin (right) (AGDB, 2019).



**Figure 6.** Star symbol in the Jannaeus bronze coin (AGDB, 2019).

During his reign (40-4 BCE), Herod had good political relations with the Roman administration. After his death, Rome decided to rule directly Judea with Roman procurators because there were political tensions with Archelaus, who ruled from 4 BCE - 6 CE. The aim of these procurators (6–66 CE) was to collect

*Hasmonean and Herodian symbols on the ancient coins of Magdala, in Galilee*

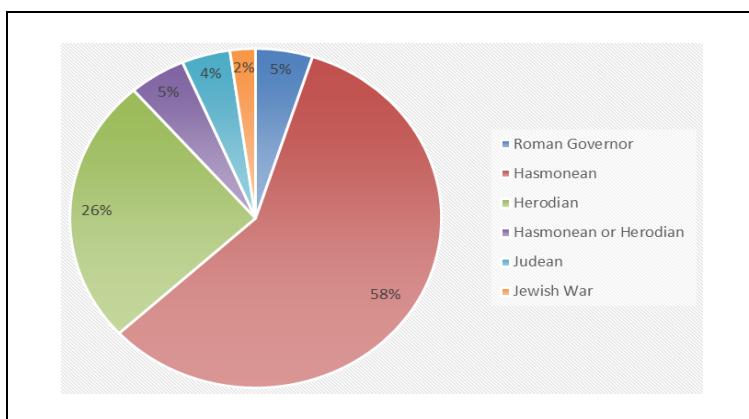
taxes for the Empire and try to maintain order and peace in Judea. To avoid frictions with the Jewish community, they kept the same style that was used by the Hasmoneans and by Herod in their coinage, leaving aside the portrait of roman emperors or gods. However, they used symbols that marked the influence of the Roman administration with the inscription KAICAPOC (Caesar).



**Figure 7.** Wreath symbol in the Antipas bronze coin, minted in Tiberias (AGDB, 2019).



**Figure 8.** Cornucopia symbol in Hasmonean bronze coin with pomegranate between horns 104 - 76 BCE (left), Herodian bronze coin with caduceus between horns 4 BCE - 6 CE (center), Roman Provincial coin under Nero with crossed cornucopia 67/8 CE (right) (AGDB, 2019).



**Figure 9.** Until now 1,351 is the total number of the bronze coins found in Magdala that do not transgress the Jewish Law.



**Figure 10.** Ritual area (A/F) of Magdala (Magdala Archaeological Project, 2017). Percentage of coins' groups found in the ritual area (A/F) of Magdala: 49% Hasmonean, 20% Herodian, 5% Roman Governor, 6% Autonomous (Tyre/Sidon), 4% Roman Provincial, 3% Judean, 2% 1<sup>st</sup> Jewish Revolt, 1% Roman Imperial, 11% Others.



**Figure 11.** Market area (E). Half of the market area was excavated by the IAA and the other half by the Anahuac University team (Magdala Archaeological Project, 2015). Percentage of coins' groups found in the market area (E) of Magdala: 50% Hasmonean coins, 17% Herodian, 4% Roman Governor, 7% Autonomous (Tyre/Sidon), 4% Roman Provincial, 1% Judean, 2% 1<sup>st</sup> Jewish Revolt, 0% Roman Imperial, 15% Others.



**Figure 12.** Domestic/Storage area (B) (Magdala Archaeological Project, 2017). Percentage of coins' groups found in the domestic/storage area (B) of Magdala: 47% Hasmonean coins, 22% Herodian, 0% Roman Governor, 5% Autonomous (Tyre/Sidon), 1% Roman Provincial, 5% Judean, 1% 1<sup>st</sup> Jewish Revolt, 1% Roman Imperial, 18% Others.

Pontius Pilate's coins found in the excavations of Magdala, are an example of this influence. On the coin type [4, p. 258] a 'simpulum' was engraved, a small pan with vertical bronze handle decorated, and it was used to extract wine from large containers in roman religious ceremonies. The 'lituus' is an ancient crosier used by the Romans for religious ceremonies, the representation of which was used as a symbol in the Roman governor coins' type [4, p. 258].

Rome had the administrative control of Judea and the Galilee during the Early Roman Period. In these first stages of Rome "whenever possible, they avoided friction with the Jewish community" in the region [4, p. 167]. Roman Procurators minted coins in Jerusalem upholding the Jews Law with symbols accepted by the Judeans and Galileans, and some subtle Roman symbols. These symbols were an instrument of political and economic propaganda through the minted coins of the dynasties ruling Judea and Galilea.

The numismatic evidence of the Hellenistic influence between the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. - 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE was found in here, thus indicating the earliest periods of possible occupation of the place. But Magdala's peak period is marked by the Jewish and Roman currencies of the Early Roman and Middle Roman Period.

In addition to the Hasmonean and Herodian dynasties coins, more coins circulated in Magdala whose symbolism was respectful of the Jewish Law (Figure 9).

The Ritual (Figure 10), Market (Figure 11) and Domestic/Storage (Figure 12) areas are located in the western side of the archaeological site of Magdala, south of the synagogue, where the highest concentration of Hasmonean and Herodian coins were found.

Stepped water installations, identified as ritual baths (*miqva'ot*) [14] were discovered in two areas (Ritual and Market areas). The *miqva'ot* excavated in the Ritual Area were used by the Jewish community for self-purification between the 1<sup>st</sup> c. and 2<sup>nd</sup> c. C.E. in Magdala (according to the pottery and coins analysis). The ones located in the market area could have been used as purification places, or water suppliers for the local activities.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Through the study of the coins and other archaeological findings, it was possible to determine that during the 1<sup>st</sup> c. and 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE the ritual and market areas, on the west side of Magdala, next to the synagogue were spaces occupied mainly by the Jewish community. So far, in local terms, the distribution of the coins found in Magdala has shown us the areas that were possibly occupied by the Jewish population in the Early and Middle Roman periods.

The Hasmonean and Herodian dynasties ruled over societies strongly influenced by the Greek-Roman world. These dynasties minted coins using iconography and epigraphy which were common for the Jewish and non-Jewish societies from Judea and Galilee.

The amount and types of Jewish coins found in Magdala dating back to the Early Roman and Middle Roman Period, along with the ritual baths (*miqva'ot*) used for purification immersions, a very well decorated synagogue with coloured

frescos and mosaics, and chalkstone vessels used for ritual purity activities; could be indicators of a very traditional Jewish population in Magdala. These Jewish coins are an example that Greek-Roman culture deeply permeated Jewish art, making it part of their daily life.

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