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Ambrosia in Damascus?

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PLATE 6

THE CIVIC coinage of Damascus issued during the Roman period deserves to be better known, not least because of the many unexplained types that it bears. It is a sad comment on the state of Syrian numismatics that Fernand de Saulcy's *Numismatique de la terre sainte*, published in 1874, remains an essential reference for the coinage of this city, despite its considerable age and the paucity of its illustrations. Among the types that he listed under Damascus is the following curious design:

‘Femme nue, debout et de face, regardant à droite; de chaque main, elle tient un cep de vigne chargé de fruits; la divinité est montée sur un cippe en forme de gros fleuron.’¹

Inspection of specimens in museums and sales catalogues (**Pl. 6, 1-3**) reveals that the type was issued on at least two occasions: once during the reign of Philip I (AD 244-249) and again in the joint reigns of Trebonianus Gallus and Volusian (AD 251-253). It may yet be discovered for other reigns; a possible earlier example will be described below.

Specimens from the reign of Philip I were unknown to de Saulcy, but there was one in the Rosenberger collection and a cursory hunt for specimens suggests they are not particularly rare.² There are three unpublished examples in the British Museum, one of which is from the same dies as the Rosenberger coin.³ Another specimen, also from the same dies as the Rosenberger piece, appeared in a recent sales catalogue; and an excellent example, from different dies, was found in excavations at Sahr in the Leja (south of Damascus) in 1999.⁴ A seventh specimen, from the same dies as the Sahr example, was offered in another recent auction.⁵ A coin of Trebonianus Gallus with this type was known to Vaillant in the late seventeenth century and the figure was described by him, and later by Eckhel and Sestini, as Bacchus.⁶ Mionnet

¹ De Saulcy 1874, p. 52, no. 10.

² Rosenberger 1978, p. 30, no. 49.

³ 1908-1-10-2379 (here **Pl. 6, 2**); 1908-1-10-2380 (here **Pl. 6, 1**; same obverse die as previous); 1908-1-10-2381 (same reverse die as previous and same dies as the Rosenberger coin).

⁴ Classical Numismatic Group MBS 79 (2008), 658. The Sahr specimen is illustrated on the cover of Augé, Duyrat (eds) 2002, and shares dies with BM 1908-1-10-2379.

⁵ Dix Noonan Webb, London, 29.10.2008, 5173. No doubt a survey of older sales catalogues would reveal other specimens of this type.

⁶ Vaillant 1695, vol II, p. 213: ‘Bacchus super cippum positus’; Eckhel 1828, p. 332: ‘Bacchus stans inter duos palmites’; Sestini 1796, p. 528, no. 13 (Ainslie collection): ‘Bacchus nudus cippo insistens, dextrâ laevaue vitis palmitem hinc inde assurgentem tenet. AE 2.’ Note however de Witte 1844, p. 8, no. 9, and p. 14, describing the figure as female and proposing that she is a maenad.

followed these authorities in listing the type as Bacchus.⁷ De Saulcy, who realised that the figure was female, knew of three examples for Trebonianus, two in Paris and one in his own collection; more recently Gabriela Bijowsky illustrated a specimen in the American Numismatic Society collection.⁸ The Volusian type was known to Mionnet and de Saulcy; Bijowsky illustrates a specimen from excavations at Caesarea Panias.⁹

Although all specimens are worn, there can be little doubt that de Saulcy's description is correct: the figure is female and naked. Her legs disappear into an uncertain device at the bottom which looks like a pot flanked by leaves, petals or even flames. De Saulcy described the device as 'un cippe en forme de gros fleuron'; Bijowski suggests 'an acanthus-like plant'.¹⁰ Some kind of vegetal motif seems likely. Nor can there be much doubt that the tendrils are meant to represent a grape vine; hence the identification of the figure by earlier numismatists as Bacchus. Indeed, very similar vines with fruits are shown on near-contemporary coins of Berytus, surrounding a figure with a panther who can only be Bacchus/Dionysus (**Pl. 6, 4**). While on most specimens of the Damascus coins only the fruits are shown, on others very clear vine leaves can be seen as well (**Pl. 6, 2**).

Bijowski 2003 suggests that this nude female is a representation of the nymph Daphne, who in myth turned into a bay laurel to escape the attentions of the god Apollo. A suburb of Antioch was named after her where there was a temple to Apollo and a grove of laurel where the nymph had supposedly metamorphosed.¹¹ Bijowski draws an interesting parallel between this representation and other images more securely identified as Daphne, particularly a 'pseudo-autonomous' coin type (i.e. a coin lacking an imperial portrait) issued at Antioch during the reign of Antoninus Pius.¹² This shows Daphne, clothed, partly transformed into a bay laurel: her lower half has become the trunk with branches sprouting from it, and her upraised arms have become additional branches.

Identifying the Damascus type as the metamorphosis of Daphne is not without its problems, as Bijowski notes. Firstly, the use of Daphne as a type on the civic coinage of Damascus is puzzling, given that there is 'apparently no direct connection between this story and Damascus'.¹³ Bijowski wonders whether the popularity of the Daphne myth in Syria (as evidenced by mosaic pavements, for example) or the design of the Antiochene coin influenced the Damascenes in their choice of type.¹⁴ While this is possible, it seems more likely that the type would refer to some place or story that had particular relevance for the Damascenes. Secondly, there is the problem of the

⁷ Mionnet 1809, p. 295, no. 80: 'Bacchus nu, debout sur un cippe, ayant les mains sur ceps de vigne chargé de fruits'.

⁸ De Saulcy 1874, p. 22, no. 10; Bijowski 2003, pl. 4, 2. For another specimen, see Dix Noonan Webb (above, n. 5), 5744 (here **Pl. 6, 3**).

⁹ Mionnet 1809, p. 296, no. 88; de Saulcy 1874, p. 53, no. 8; Bijowski 2003, pl. 4, 1.

¹⁰ De Saulcy 1874, p. 22; Bijowski 2003, p. 54.

¹¹ On the laurel tree, Downey 1961, pp. 22, 83; on the site of Daphne, Downey, pp. 29-32, 82-6.

¹² Butcher 2004, p. 369, no. 343c; McAlee 1997 and 2007, p. 98, no. 138. Though without an imperial portrait, the coin bears a date and can be assigned to the reign of Antoninus Pius.

¹³ Bijowski 2003, p. 55.

¹⁴ 2003, p. 58.

identity of the plant into which the figure appears to be transforming. Bijowski agrees that the plant is a vine and not a laurel tree but proposes that the choice of plant is not significant.¹⁵ On many representations showing the metamorphosis of Daphne (for example, the Antiochene coins) the nymph is transforming into something that looks much more like a tree than the Damascene types, but Bikowski cites representations that more closely resemble vines (assuming in these cases that the figure has been correctly identified as Daphne). Indeed, there seems to have been no canonical image of Daphne, and Olga Palagia notes that ‘there is no conformity in the treatment of the [metamorphosis] scene in mosaics, sculpture, gems, coins, glass and silver vessels.’¹⁶ This may be the consequence of transmission of the scene primarily through oral or literary rather than visual sources.¹⁷

Of course it is quite possible that Daphne had an association with Damascus which has simply not come down to us and that the type was pertinent there, but I believe that the vines point to another possible identity for the figure. Daphne may be the best-known example of a mythical figure who metamorphosed into a tree or other plant, but various other nymphs were also transformed in this way. Indeed, it could be argued that the well-known depictions of the metamorphosis of Daphne belong to a wider tradition of representations of nymphs turning into trees. For example, in Philostratus’ *Imagines* there is a description of a painting showing the Heliades metamorphosing into poplars, and this vividly recalls the images of Daphne: ‘the painting ... puts roots at the extremities of their toes, while some ... are trees to the waist, and branches have supplanted the arms of others’.¹⁸ Perhaps we should admit the possibility that some of the metamorphoses assumed by modern scholars to be representations of Daphne are actually those of other mythical figures.

Given the presence of vines, a possible alternative identity for the figure on the coin is Ambrosia.¹⁹ She is generally enumerated among the Hyades, the nurses of Dionysus, and metamorphosed into a grape vine during Dionysus’ war with Lycurgus. The image of Lycurgus ensnared in the vine was popular in the Roman world, and well-known today through images of the Lycurgus cup in the British Museum. In that particular scene Ambrosia does not appear in human form, but other representations of her as a human figure, or metamorphosing into a vine, are known from Hellenistic times onwards.²⁰ Roman-period representations include a late third century AD mosaic from Brading Roman villa on the Isle of Wight (**Pl. 6, 5**). Although the mosaic is damaged, Ambrosia’s lower half appears to be in the

¹⁵ 2003, pp. 54, 58.

¹⁶ *LIMC*, s.v. ‘Daphne’.

¹⁷ On ekphrasis as a means of transmitting images, see Butcher 2003, pp. 318-19.

¹⁸ *Imagines* 1.11.

¹⁹ For a discussion, see in particular Chuvin 1991, pp. 256-8. Note that Julien Aliquot, in his recent study of religion in Lebanon (2009, p. 190), has also noted Ambrosia as one of the possible identities for the figure on the coins of Damascus; he proposes as an alternative the nymph Halimede, mother of the hero Damaskos (on whom see de Witte 1844, p. 6).

²⁰ Bruneau and Vatin 1966, discussing a late second or early first century BC mosaic from Delos: this shows Ambrosia in human form together with the vines, but does not match closely the scene on our coins. See also *LIMC*, s.v. Lykourgos 1.33. Other images are discussed by Picard 1939, pp. 339-42; see also *LIMC*, Lykourgos 1.31-53.

earth, with vines curling up around her. A late third century AD mosaic at Piazza Armerina in Sicily shows her as a human figure, her lower half transformed into vine tendrils. In both cases she is associated with the figure of Lycurgus, which helps to identify her securely.²¹

As with Daphne, there seems to be no canonical form for images of Ambrosia. However, unlike Daphne, Ambrosia has a convincing Damascene connection. There was a long-standing tradition in antiquity that Nysa, the birthplace of Dionysus, was located in Phoenicia, Arabia or near Damascus. This Near Eastern association, and the tradition that Dionysus' enemy Lycurgus was a ruler in the region, seem to go back to the Hellenistic period, if not earlier.²² Diodorus Siculus recalls a tradition whereby Lycurgus is a king of Arabia rather than Thrace (3.65.7), and there are a number of inscriptions from the Syrian Hauran, south of Damascus, referring to Lycurgus, prompting scholars to identify this opponent of Dionysus with a teetotal deity mentioned in Semitic inscriptions from as far apart as Palmyra and the Nabataean kingdom.²³ In antiquity the Hauran was famous for its vines; in the late second century AD a village there was raised to civic status with the name Dionysias.²⁴ More importantly, a late antique epic, Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*, places the conflict between Lycurgus and Dionysus in this region. In this work, Dionysus, having traversed the coastal cities to the source of the river Adonis, proceeds to Arabia, which is ruled by Lycurgus. Hera encourages Lycurgus and his warriors to fight Dionysus, and Dionysus is forced to flee. Ambrosia saves the day by turning herself into a vine and entangling Lycurgus, allowing Dionysus' followers to attack him.²⁵

Nonnus does not specify the precise location of the battle between Lycurgus and Dionysus, but other late antique sources place the conflict in Damascus itself,²⁶ and an association between Dionysus and the neighbouring city of Heliopolis has long been noted.²⁷ One might hesitate to attach much significance to these late sources for interpreting the types on third century coins, but others have found Nonnus useful as 'a palimpsest to be read against earlier mythical material',²⁸ and at least one scholar has identified Lycurgus and Ambrosia on the much-mutilated reliefs from the adyton

²¹ Brading: *LIMC*, s.v. Lykourgos 1.41; Piazza Armerina, 1.42.

²² For a lengthy discussion, see Retsö 2003, pp. 610-14. The tradition of Nysa being in Arabia is found in a Homeric Hymn to Dionysus preserved in Diodorus 3.66.3. See also Diodorus 4.2.3, where Nysa is located between Phoenicia and the Nile, and Pliny, HN 5.74. For the possible Hellenistic origins of the Dionysiac myths and Damascus, see Aliquot 2009, pp. 189-91.

²³ Dussaud and Macler 1903, pp. 62-3; Sourdel 1952, pp. 81-4; Retsö 2003, p. 613.

²⁴ Butcher 2003, pp. 135-6.

²⁵ Nonnus, *Dionysiaca*, 20-21. The episode of Ambrosia's transformation may well be modelled on that of Daphne, as suggested by H.J. Rose in the notes to the Loeb translation of Nonnus, vol ii, p. 148 n.

²⁶ Damascius, *Life of Isidore*, 200 (Dionysus vanquishes Lycurgus and his Arabs by sprinkling wine from a wineskin (*askos*) and hence the name Damaskos; alternatively, the name of the city derives from a giant called Askos); Stephanus, s.v. Damaskos (relating the story of how Lycurgus and the giant Askos chained Dionysus and threw him into a river). The Dionysiac connection with Damascus was noted by Eckhel in his discussion of the coin type (1828, p. 332).

²⁷ On the association of Bacchus/Dionysus with the cults of Heliopolis, see Winnefeld 1923, pp. 110-28; Seyrig 1929, pl. lxxxiv, no. 6; Hajjar 1977; Aliquot 2009.

²⁸ On Nonnus as a source of information about earlier myths, see Price 2005, p. 117, and Chuvin 1991, *passim*.

of the so-called ‘Temple of Bacchus’ at Heliopolis, which is thought to be of Antonine date.²⁹ A local association with the metamorphosis of Ambrosia seems plausible.

Nonnus’ description of Ambrosia’s metamorphosis is worth quoting in full, not least because it provides a vivid accompaniment to our coin images:

‘Saffron-robed Ambrosia fled the bold man and prayed to Mother Earth to save her from Lycurgos. And the Earth, mother of all fruits, opened a gulf, and received Ambrosia the nurse of Bromios alive in a loving embrace. The nymph disappeared and changed her shape into a plant - she became a vine-shoot, which of itself coiled its winding cord round the neck of Lycurgos and throttled him with a tight noose, battling now with threatening clusters as once with the thyrus.’ (Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 21, ll 24-32, trans. W.H.D. Rouse)

Dionysus himself does not figure frequently on the coinage of Damascus,³⁰ but the theme of the vine occurs on other types of the city, although some of these are no easier to interpret than that under discussion. On an issue from the reign of Philip a female figure, fully clothed, with a lion beside her, sits beneath a vine (**Pl. 6, 6**).³¹ The vine also appears on coins depicting a temple above a grotto with a spring (usually identified as that at Ain Fijeh in the Antilebanon, west of Damascus) from the reigns of Macrinus (AD 217-218) and Valerian and Gallienus (AD 253-260) (**Pl. 6, 7-8**).³² One might postulate that these images were also connected in some way with the legend of Ambrosia (if the proposed identification is correct), though there appear to be no clues in the surviving literature and iconography to support this proposition and a more general association with Dionysiac myth might be a preferable interpretation. If nothing else, these other types demonstrate how much work remains to be done on this interesting civic coinage, and the extent to which Dionysiac imagery might have been significant in the Damascene region.

In conclusion, Ambrosia seems more plausible than Daphne as the identification of the figure on the Damascene coins. This hypothesis would better explain the vines, the use of the type on coins of Damascus, and perhaps the device around the feet of the figure (rather than being a vegetal motif, it might be an attempt to show Ambrosia being received by the earth, although the transformation of her lower part into a plant might seem more likely). Such an identification would place the type firmly within a local south Syrian / Arabian mythological tradition, which in late antique literature had specific links with Damascus. Indeed, the closest numismatic parallel is not the Antiochene coin with Daphne, but another small ‘pseudo-autonomous’ type showing a female figure, half-transformed, clasping the branches of what are clearly vines, with bunches of grapes, sprouting from her metamorphosed lower half (**Pl. 6, 9**). The identity of the mint is not clear, but the legend appears to read [...]MACKHN[...].

²⁹ Picard 1939; the identification with Ambrosia of the kneeling (or partially-sunken) female figure with a vine growing next to her, found on the frieze on left hand side of the adyton, seems convincing. See now Aliquot 2009, pp. 191-2.

³⁰ A early example of Dionysiac imagery at Damascus occurs under Nero: *RPC* I, 4806.

³¹ De Saulcy 1874, p. 48, no. 11. This might be a representation of Atargatis, assumed to be one of the main divinities associated with Damascus.

³² Price and Trell 1975, p. 206, fig. 413.

Thus it may be an earlier issue of Damascus, when the city was still inscribing its coins in Greek, bearing the ethnic of the Damascenes, ΔΑΜΑΚΗΝΩΝ, and showing the same figure.³³ If so, the type was not unique to the reign of Philip and later, and suggests that the myth was not a late development belonging to the period of the Roman colony;³⁴ but vindication of such a conclusion must await the identification of a better-preserved specimen. Until then, we may tentatively propose that the coins of Philip provide the earliest evidence for an association of Ambrosia with Damascus, and a lively but distant foreshadowing of the episode in Nonnus' epic.

Key to Plate 6

1. Reverse of a bronze coin of Damascus of Philip I (AD 244-249). British Museum 1908 1-10-2380.
2. Reverse of a bronze coin of Damascus of Philip I (AD 244-249). British Museum 1908 1-10-2379.
3. Reverse of a bronze coin of Damascus of Trebonianus Gallus (AD 251-253). Trade, 2008.
4. Reverse of a bronze coin of Berytus of Gordian III (AD 238-244). Private coll.
5. Metamorphosis of Ambrosia from the mosaic in Brading Roman Villa, Isle of Wight, UK. Rectangular panel showing Lycurgus, holding a double axe, standing over the figure of Ambrosia. Detail from a photograph kindly provided by Alison Cooley.
6. Reverse of a bronze coin of Damascus of Otacilia Severa, wife of Philip I (AD 244-249). Trade, 2008.
7. Reverse of a bronze coin of Damascus of Macrinus (AD 217-218). Private coll.
8. Reverse of a bronze coin of Damascus of Gallienus (AD 253-268). Private coll.
9. Obverse and reverse of a bronze coin from an uncertain mint (Damascus?).
Obverse: ΤΥΧΗ. Turreted bust of city goddess right. Reverse: [...].MACKHN[...].
Female figure with her lower half transformed into a vine, with bunches of fruits, clasping the branches with her hands. Private coll.

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³³ The city began issuing coins with Latin legends - or at any rate in Greek using Latin letters - under Philip, and must have acquired colonial status at some point between the issues of Philip and the previous coinage under Elagabalus: Millar 2006, p. 216.

³⁴ Chuvin 1991, p. 268, questioned by Aliquot 2009, p. 190.

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PLATE 6



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BUTCHER, AMBROSIA IN DAMASCUS?

