

SHEKELS AND HALF-SHEKELS OF TYRE - A BRIEF SURVEY

Posted by Josh Illingworth, NGC Ancients on 8/14/2012

This month, NGC Ancients examines the silver Shekels and Half-Shekels of Tyre, some of the most recognizable coins of the ancient world.

Though shekels were struck during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. by several rulers of Tyre, a city of ancient Phoenicia, the most important type was struck for almost two centuries, between c.126/5 BC and c.AD 65/66. This coin features on the obverse a portrait of Melkart, the Punic equivalent of the Greek hero Heracles (Hercules). Its reverse shows an eagle with a palm branch over its shoulder, standing on the prow of a ship. Additionally, in the reverse field there are various control symbols and a date represented by one or more Greek letters.



The main design did not change over the years, though there is much variety in the form of dates and monograms. To demonstrate the overall consistency of the design, we can compare a shekel from one of the earliest years of issue (civic year 6, 121/0 BC) with one of the last years of issue (civic year 177, AD 51/2). Though separated by more than one hundred and seventy years, they are instantly recognizable as being of the same series of coinage.

Shekels of Tyre are among the most frequent submissions to NGC Ancients. Recently we received a noteworthy pair issued in consecutive years (civic years 153 and 154) which share an unexpected trait: they were struck from the same obverse die. Understandably, the obverse of the year 154 coin is in slightly later state, with the major distinguishing characteristic being the large flaw across the cheek of Melkart.



Shekels of Tyre fulfilled an important need in many parts of the ancient world: that of a large denomination coinage in high-purity silver. In ancient Jerusalem, a prominent city of the ancient world, there was a specific need for coins of good silver. The only city nearby which consistently produced such coins was Tyre, a coastal city famous for the purple dye it extracted from within the murex shell. As a hub of commerce, Tyre produced large quantities of coins, many of which found their way to Jerusalem.



In addition to the shekel, Tyre also struck half-shekels, which may have been issued principally to pay the annual tax at the Temple in Jerusalem. While half the size of the shekel, this coin retains the same design elements and dating system as its larger counterpart. This coin shown here is typical of the series as a whole. It features the Melkart/eagle combination, and the Greek letters ("AN") above the club in the left reverse field, indicating it was struck during civic year 51, which equates to 76/5 BC.



With such a long-running series, it is only natural that some dates within the series would take on an added significance for collectors of ancients. For example, there is the so-called "millennium shekel," which was struck in civic year 126, or 1 BC/AD 1. This rare date, an example of which is shown here, commands a premium over any common date shekel of Tyre.



The most popular date in the series, however, is the issue of civic year 159, or AD 33/4. Following traditional chronologies, this is the year in which Jesus was crucified by the Procurator Pontius Pilate. An example is illustrated here. Like the millennium shekel, this piece commands a substantial premium.

The shekel of Tyre also has another connection with Biblical history. According to many historians, the "thirty pieces of silver" that Judas is said to have received for betraying Jesus, were in the form of shekels of Tyre.

With the exception of the dates discussed above, shekels and half-shekels of Tyre are relatively available in the marketplace, and a pleasing, reasonably priced example may be located without too much difficulty.

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