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# STUDIES IN HONOUR OF ARNOLD SPAER

*Edited by:* DAN BARAG AND BOAZ ZISSU



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# A Note on a Medallion of Antoninus Pius from Neapolis: The Largest Medallion Minted in Palestine

ROBERT DEUTSCH

ANTONINUS Pius, the adopted son of Hadrian, was born on September 19, 86, and became Roman Emperor on July 11, 138. He died on March 7, 161, at the advanced age of seventy-four. He reigned for twenty-three years, and until the end of the third century was the second longest reigning emperor after Augustus, lasting one month longer than Tiberius. He refrained from engaging in military adventures beyond those necessary for maintenance of the empire and is considered a peaceful emperor.

The massive minting of city coinage in Palestine during his reign is represented in Neapolis by a series of coins including the following medallion, which appears to be the largest ever minted in Palestine:

Æ medallion; 48 mm; 56.3 gr.; ↑ (Fig. 1)

*Obv.*: Laureate draped and cuirassed bust of Antoninus Pius to r.; Greek legend upwards from bottom left: [ANTΩ]NINOC CEBAC EYCE AY[TOK KA]I(C)AP

*Rev.*: Mount Gerizim is represented as two mountain peaks, separated by a sloping roadway. A steep, broad stairway leads up between houses to a temple seen in three-quarters perspective. Below is a colonnade with eleven pillars and two arches over the columns. The entrance leads to a square with a horned altar. A path leads to the right from the center of the road to a higher hill with a second horned altar. Greek legend from bottom left upwards: ΦΛ



Fig. 1. The Medallion



NEACΠOΛEΩC CYPIAC ΠAAAICTINE[C] ET ΠH (“Fl[avia] Neapolis [which is in] Syria-Palestine, year 88 [160 CE]”)<sup>1</sup>

The dies used to mint our medallion are significantly larger than those used for regular sestertii. The obverse is surrounded by an elaborated frame resembling a bezel, and the reverse shows a large image of Mount Gerizim surrounded by a chain of dots, two parallel lines, a circular groove and a raised border ridge. The limits of the dies are not visible, which means that the dies were larger than 48 mm. In contrast, the limits of the dies are clearly visible on sestertii.<sup>2</sup>

The representation of Mount Gerizim with a stairway leading to the temple on its peak first appears on the coins of Antoninus Pius toward the end of his reign. His coins are dated ΠZ (year 87, i.e., 159 CE), ΠH (year 88, i.e., 160 CE), or ΠΘ (year 89, i.e., 161 CE), or are undated. Therefore we can not establish the exact first appearance of the mountain in his reign; a date earlier than 87 CE is also possible.

Mount Gerizim became the emblem of Neapolis and was adopted by all subsequent emperors. It appears on their coinage covering the surface of the reverse, or in small icons on eagles’ wings, or on the back of a she-wolf, or in the background.<sup>3</sup> The last coins issued in Neapolis were struck during the reign of Trebonianus Gallus (and his son Volusianus) in 251–253 CE. The emblem was also used on jewelry, including rings.<sup>4</sup> In the fourth and fifth centuries, the emblem was represented on typical Samaritan oil lamps by a temple with a flight of steps leading to it.<sup>5</sup>

The term “medallion” is misleading as it is used for all the large specimens minted in Palestine. Therefore a subdivision into two main groups is required:

1. Commemorative — unusually large specimens, not designated for commercial use but minted to commemorate outstanding events.

<sup>1</sup> The medallion was purchased from a licensed antiquities dealer in the Old City of Jerusalem in 1990 and was first cleaned by Shraga Qedar. It has been offered for sale by Antiqua Inc. (catalog VIII, lot 89). It is presently located in the Judge Abraham D. Sofaer collection, USA. See Y. Meshorer and G. Bijovsky: *Coins of the Holy Land: The Abraham D. Sofaer Collection at the American Numismatic Society*, New York (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> G. F. Hill: *Catalogue of Greek Coins: Palestine*, London, 1914, p. 48, pl. V, no. 14; Y. Meshorer: *TestiMoney*, Jerusalem, 2000, p. 37, no. 2 (A. Spaer collection).

<sup>3</sup> Y. Meshorer: *City-Coins of Eretz-Israel and the Decapolis in the Roman Period*, Jerusalem, 1985, p. 52, nos. 144–146.

<sup>4</sup> Meshorer (n. 2 above), p. 37, no. 1; L. Wolfe and F. Sternberg: *Objects with Semitic Inscriptions 1100 B.C.–A.D. 700: Jewish, Early Christian and Byzantine Antiquities*, Auction XXIII, Zurich, 1989, p. 89, lots 320–322.

<sup>5</sup> V. Sussman: Samaritan Oil Lamps, in E. Stern and H. Eshel (eds.): *The Samaritans*, Jerusalem, 2002, p. 357, nos. 16–17 (Hebrew); Y. Meshorer (n. 3 above), p. 52.

2. Commercial — coins the size of Roman sestertii, currency in circulation and used in everyday commercial activity.<sup>6</sup>

The largest previously recorded medallion is in the collection of Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. This specimen is undated and measures 43 mm in diameter.<sup>7</sup>

What was the purpose of minting such a large medallion in Neapolis in 88 CE? As far as we know, Antoninus Pius did not travel to Palestine as his adoptive father Hadrian had done and no special events in his honor were celebrated. The reason for minting such a magnificent medallion will remain unknown for the time being.

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<sup>6</sup> Numerous sestertii minted by the city of Neapolis and referred to as medallions have been recorded; a limited survey reveals that the majority are heavily damaged as a result of intensive use and many are even perforated. See Hill (n. 2 above), pp. 48–49, pl. V, nos. 14–16; C. W. Samuels, P. Rynearson, and Y. Meshorer: *The Numismatic Legacy of the Jews as Depicted by a Distinguished American Collection*, New York, 2000, pp. 114, 204, no. 200, pl. 10; A. Kindler: *Thesaurus of Judaean Coins from the Fourth Century B.C. to the Third Century A.D.*, Jerusalem, 1958, pp. 19–20, no. 32, pls. 32a–b (Hebrew), pp. 12–13 (English summary); M. Rosenberger: *City-Coins of Palestine*, vol. 3, Jerusalem, 1977, p. 6, nos. 8–9; Y. Meshorer: *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum: The Collection of the American Numismatic Society*, part 6: *Palestine-South Arabia*, New York, 1981, pl. 31, no. 965; D. Hendin: *Guide to Biblical Coins* (4th ed.), New York, 2001, pp. 388–389, no. 878 (facsimile from de Saulcy, coin dated year 87), pl. 34, no. 878 (coin dated year 88).

<sup>7</sup> F. de Saulcy: *Numismatique de la Terre Sainte*, Paris, 1874, p. 248, no. 1, pl. XIII, no. 1 (facsimile); Hill (n. 2 above), p. xxviii, pl. XXXIX, no. 7.