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A Rare *Aureus* of Antoninus Pius at Bethsaida

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**Abstract**
In the summer of 2010 a rare *aureus* naming Antoninus Pius and struck in 138 CE was unearthed in excavations at Bethsaida, located north of the Sea of Galilee. The coin was found in a small room of a house with second-century CE finds and together with an iron lance head, a dagger and an iron sickle in an adjacent room. This article summarizes the coin’s archaeological context.

In the twenty-fourth season of excavations at Bethsaida a rare coin, an *aureus* of Antoninus Pius, was discovered in Area A (Fig. 1).

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Fig. 1. Aureus from Bethsaida (1:1 and 2:1 scale)

Reg. No. 23022, Area A, L2201. IAA 137118.
Antoninus Pius, Rome, 138 CE.
**Obv:** IMP T AEL CAES ANTONINVS Draped, bearded bust r.
**Rev:** TRI POT COS DES II Veiled Pietas to r., dressed in long robe, r. leg slightly drawn back, before altar decorated with round small objects (flowers?); her open r. hand is raised above the altar and she holds a container (incense?) in her l. hand; in fields: PIE–TAS.

*Aureus* (97.6% purity), ↓, 7.17 g, 19 mm.

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1 The Bethsaida Excavations Project is carried out by a consortium headed by the University of Nebraska at Omaha directed by Rami Arav. See Arav and Freund 1995–2009. For the Hellenistic and Roman periods see also Savage 2007, 2011; Fortner 2008. A further numismatic analysis may be found in Shachar 2004:23–25.
ARCHEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Bethsaida is located on the northeastern corner of the Sea of Galilee, along the northern edge of an alluvial plain and the southern edge of the Golan Heights lava flow. The large roughly oval-shaped mound, situated approximately 250 m east of the estuary of the Jordan River, extends over nearly eight hectares. Area A is located in the northeastern part of the mound at its summit. The coin was found in Stratum II, which began with a reoccupation of Bethsaida during the reign of Ptolemy II (284–246 BCE). Later, John Hyrcanus I’s expansion into the Golan area in the late second century BCE caused the site to dramatically dwindle in size and remain relatively small in comparison to the earlier Seleucid occupation. Also at this time there was a remarkable shift in the ceramic corpus, which indicates a transition in the ethnic identity of the residents. This may have occurred as a result of settlers entering the region from the Judean south.

In 30 CE, Philip, son of Herod I, renamed Bethsaida Julias after Julia/Livia the wife of Augustus and the mother of Tiberius and enhanced it to the status of a polis. A temple previously built during the Hellenistic period was altered, perhaps indicating adaptation for imperial cultic use. Yet despite the renaming, new status, and some architectural additions, including a new 1.6 m wide city wall built atop segments of the Iron Age city wall, the village never thrived as a city; never developed urban institutions and never minted coins. It appears that throughout the Roman period Bethsaida/Julias was never more than a small village occupying the top of the hill with perhaps some deserted Hellenistic homes at the northern end of the site. No Roman military installations have been found at the site. Nevertheless, habitation at the site did continue into the early fourth century CE without interruption. Bethsaida appears to have been abandoned before the advent of Byzantine rule.

The aureus of Antoninus Pius is associated with Stratum IId, a division of the Hellenistic/Roman Stratum II, representing a period marked by significant building activity.

In the context where the coin appeared, in a small well-defined room with an impressive paved floor, a heavy iron Roman lance head 52.5 cm in length was found, as well as a dagger. Elsewhere in the dwelling, which appears to have been rather large, other items were found indicating that the building was indeed domestic in character. Among those items were early Roman Galilean bowls, everted-rim casseroles, jars, jugs, oil lamps, and fragments of Roman glass, including an almost intact bottle. Some of the cooking pots had double grooved

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2 The extent of the building cannot yet be measured unequivocally. It seems to extend into the adjacent square and perhaps even farther. Additional excavation is needed in the adjacent squares to clearly determine its boundaries. This structure may be of a type similar to the large courtyard dwellings found in the north of the tell.
rims that are indicative of a first/second century CE occupation. In addition, lead fishing weights, loom weights, iron nails and a basalt door socket were found in this house and may indicate something of the vocations of the inhabitants.

To the east of the wall that bisected the square where the coin lay was an impressive paved courtyard above which an intact iron sickle was recovered. The architectural and artifactual finds seem to indicate that the inhabitants were modestly well off. Since it is impossible to know how the heavy iron lance head, the dagger and the gold coin were acquired and reached this house, it is likewise implausible to imply from them a Roman military presence at Bethsaida during this period.

DISCUSSION

On the obverse, the profile bust of Antoninus is rendered with extraordinary artistic skill. He is shown in an ideal profile, conveying the boldness of a determined, ambitious young man. This idealized depiction is different from later renderings in which his large and sunken eyes may allude to a more hesitant and reserved personality. Hill purposed that this bold rendering on his early coins was a deliberate effort to emphasize, in the debate that ensued following Hadrian’s death, Hadrian’s worthiness for consecration and Antoninus’ merit as his successor (Hill 1970:83).

The portrayal of Pietas on the reverse is somewhat careless. Since no sacrifice or offering is seen on the altar, Mattingly suggested that the gesture is that of a prayer rather than of thanksgiving (CRE IV:xlix).

Based upon its legend, this coin belongs to group 2a proposed by Hill (1970:80). At least two similar aurei are known (Mazzini 1957:305, Pl. LXXII:614; Xavier Calicó 2003:305, No. 1597a [ex Auctiones AG, Basel, 21–22/IX/1989: No. 1052]). A third one may be Breccia 1933:30, No. 69.³ None, however, came from an archaeological excavation.

The main question regarding this coin is its date.⁴ Much uncertainty exists about the chronological order of these coins. They may have been struck under Hadrian while Antoninus was caesar, or they are one of the first types minted by Antoninus as augustus. The only discussions about this are still Strack (1931:1–3), Mattingly (CRE III:cli–cliii; CRE IV:xl) and Hill (1970:79–84). Regardless, aurei of either emperor are extremely rare finds in Israel. Denarii are somewhat more common. Interestingly, out of the 12 isolated finds of Antoninus Pius denarii

³ The coins were not examined for die identity.
⁴ We are greatly indebted to David R. Sear and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable advice.
in Israel (Donald T. Ariel, pers. comm.), one of these was discovered at Bethsaida as well (2009 season, Reg. No. 21686; IAA 104766).

REFERENCES


ABBREVIATIONS

AJC Y. Meshorer Ancient Jewish Coinage. Dix Hills, NY 1982
AJN American Journal of Numismatics
BMC e.g., BMC Arab.: G.F. Hill. Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Arabia, Mesopotamia, and Persia. London 1922
BMCO e.g., BMCO 1: S. Lane-Poole. The Coins of the Eastern Khaleefehs in the British Museum. Catalogue of the Oriental Coins in the British Museum 1. London 1875
CH Coin Hoards
CIL Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum
CNP e.g., L. Kadman. The Coins of Akko Ptolemais (Corpus Nummorum Palaestinensium IV). Jerusalem 1961
CRE e.g., H. Mattingly. The Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum I. Augustus to Vitellius. London 1923
IEJ Israel Exploration Journal
IG Inscriptiones Graecae
INJ Israel Numismatic Journal
INR Israel Numismatic Research
LA Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Liber Annuus
MN American Numismatic Society Museum Notes
NC Numismatic Chronicle
NCirc. Numismatic Circular
NNM Numismatic Notes and Monographs
NZ Numismatische Zeitschrift
RIC e.g., C.H.V. Sutherland. The Roman Imperial Coinage I. From 31 BC to AD 69. London 1984
RN Revue Numismatique
RPC e.g., A. Burnett, M. Amandry and I. Carradice. From Vespasian to Domitian (AD 69–96). Roman Provincial Coinage 2. London 1999
SC e.g., S. Album and T. Goodwin. Syllogle of Islamic Coins in the Ashmolean, Volume 1: The Pre-Reform Coinage of the Early Islamic Period. Oxford 2002
SICA e.g., L. Ilish. Sylloge Numorum Arabicorum Tübingen–Palästina IVa Bilâd aš-Šâm I. Tübingen 1993
SNG Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum (with suffix as necessary, e.g. SNG Cop.)
SNR Schweizerische Numismatische Rundschau
TINC Transactions of the International Numismatic Congress
ZfN Zeitschrift für Numismatik
Israel Numismatic Research
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