

An Unpublished ‘Medallion’ of Elagabalus from Edessa in Osrhoene: Nergal and Syro-Mesopotamian Religious Continuity?

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Following Elagabalus’ victory over Macrinus in June 218, the city of Edessa in Osrhoene issued a number of coins that celebrated and commemorated the ascension of the new emperor. On these early issues are symbols commonly found in the Greco-Roman iconographic lexicon (e.g., Nike, palm branch, and cornucopia). Among these coins, however, is a small medallion or a medallic tetrassarion with an enigmatic symbol (an animal-headed object) before the emperor’s bust, one of two issues from any of the Mesopotamian mints to have a symbol in the field on the obverse (the other is a small bronze coin for Caracalla with a wreath before the bust. For Elagabalus, see Figures 1-3).¹ The coin is unpublished. There are three specimens known to the author, all struck with the same obverse and reverse dies:



Figure 1. Elagabalus, Edessa, AE Medallion / Tetrassarion c. AD 218-19.² Image courtesy of Ashmolean Museum.



Figure 2. Elagabalus, Edessa, AE Medallion/Tetrassarion c. AD 218-19.³ Image courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France.

¹ For Caracalla, see BMC 34 and Bibliothèque nationale de France AA.GR.5155. See Dandrow (2016): 195 (Type 5 coin) and pl. 22.6.

² Ashmolean Museum, 28.0mm, 16.34g, 12h.

³ BnF Chandon de Briailles 1324, 13.3g.



Figure 3. Elagabalus, Edessa, AE Medallion / Tetrassarion, c. AD 218-19.⁴ Image courtesy of the author.

OBV. Laureate bust wearing a cuirass and paludamentum facing right and seen from the front. In the right field before the bust is the animal-headed object facing right; AYT KANTWNEINON.

REV. Tyche wearing a mural crown, chiton, and himation. She sits on rocks, leaning on her left hand behind, while her right arm is extended forward and holds a branch or flowers; below is a river-god swimming right; MAPAYPAN-TC(sic)EΔECCA.

While the overall imagery, aesthetic style, and language are indicative of Roman imperial belonging, the symbol on the coin is an expression of localism or regionalism in which its identity, meaning, and significance can be found in its Syro-Mesopotamian cultural context. An examination of pre-Hellenic imagery in the region reveals that the object in question is the lion-head scimitar of Nergal, god of war, disease, and 'lord of the underworld.'⁵ The peculiar use of an ancient symbol associated with a god of war and death raises several questions and requires explanation. Given the popularity of the cult of Heracles-Nergal in the region during the late Hellenistic and Roman periods and the symbolic importance of the hero's club, why would the engraver utilize this older symbol? Is it merely archaizing and devoid of contemporary significance, or does it embody meaningful values that the Edessenes could communicate to local, regional, or imperial audiences and authorities? Here I rely on Bunnens' work on Iron Age motifs in the Roman period. He argues against archaizing and that such motifs must have 'maintained some sort of continuity between the two periods, in both form and content', but that we cannot ascertain a detailed understanding of a motif's ideological context and theological meaning.⁶ At best we can conjecture what the meaning might have been by conducting a comparison of images from different periods and an examination of their respective general contexts.⁷

Following Bunnens and others, it is the purpose of this article to examine this coin's numismatic and cultural contexts in order to (1) confirm the identification of the Nergal symbol and the god's cultic presence at Edessa and neighboring cities; (2) establish and define Nergal's functions and his connection to political authority during first millennium BCE; and (3) explore the political, cultural, and religious contexts and possible messaging and potential audiences. Finally,

⁴ Author's coll., 30.0mm, 14.62g, 6h.

⁵ There is some uncertainty regarding the object. While most scholars describe it as a scimitar, it is possible that it is a lion-head mace or scepter, or the head of a staff. See Black and Green (1992): 136 and 169. For the purpose of this study, I refer to it as a scimitar.

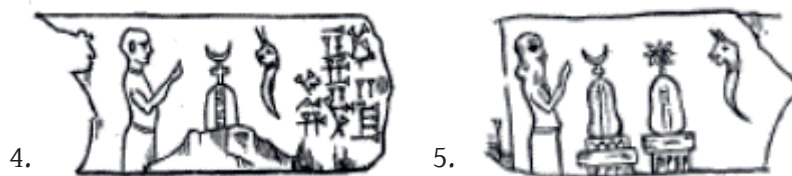
⁶ Bunnens (2015): 122.

⁷ Bunnens (2015): 123.

it should be stated that, while focusing on the coin, this study addresses larger issues such as the survival of Iron Age iconography and cults in the Roman period, cultural hybridity, borderland identities, and local expressions of imperial belonging and responses to imperial events.

THE LION-HEAD SCIMITAR: TRADITION AND CHANGE

By the first millennium BC the scimitar became almost exclusively associated with Nergal, although previously other deities would wield it, especially in either scenes in which death occurs or in recognition of the death-dealing power of that deity. The depiction of a free-floating lion-head scimitar appears to be also a first-millennium BC (Iron Age) development. On several cylinder seals dating to the Neo-Babylonian and early Achaemenid periods we find the same free-floating symbol as that on the coin of Elagabalus (see Figures 4-5).



Figures 4-5. Drawings of late Neo-Babylonian seal imprints, c. 560-540 BC.⁸ Images public domain from Ward (1910).

While it is depicted in the field on some cylinder seals, it is more commonly represented as set on an altar during this time period, and usually accompanying a symbol of another deity likewise set on an altar (see Figures 6-7).



Figure 6. Drawing of cylinder seal imprint from Neo-Babylonian period, c. 612-539 BC.⁹ Image from Black and Green.

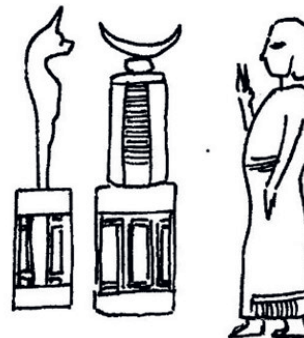


Figure 7. Drawing of cylinder seal impression VA 10355, Neo-Babylonian period, c. 612-539 BC.¹⁰ Image from Klengel-Brandt.

⁸ For figures 4-5, see Ward (1910): 193, nos. 546-7. Ward assigns the object to the god Zamama-Ninib (194). Ward records these seals from Ménant (1886): 136, nos. 125-7, which belonged to an unnamed private collection. Ménant characterizes the object in question as a dragon.

⁹ See Black and Green (1992): 94, image 74 = Wiggermann (1998-2001e): 224, no. 5 = von der Osten (1936), no. 132. For the Achaemenid period, see Mitchell and Searight (2008): no. 392 (from 517 BC) #4 (described as a lion-head standard), and no. 401b (514 BC; described as a lion-head staff on altar). These Persian-period seals were found at Abu Habbah in north-west Syria.

¹⁰ For figure 7, see VA 10355 (possibly found in Babylon[?]) in Klengel-Brandt (1997): 89, no. 87.

On every Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid cylinder seal with the floating symbol of Nergal, the crescent moon of Sîn atop an ovoid stone or baetyl is present, while nearly all of those that show the scimitar ensconced likewise present an altar with Sîn's symbol. This observation further reinforces the historical affiliation between these two deities (see below).

While the placement of the scimitar on various material objects changed over time (not completely, though), its appearance remained the same. For example, on cylinder seals from the Old Babylonian period (1800-1595 BC) it is in the ground next to Nergal or in his hand. These depictions show it as an enlarged scimitar with an 'S' shaped lion-head hilt, such as VA 08462 in the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and BM 132841 in the British Museum (see Figures 8-9).



Figure 8. Cylinder seal and imprint, Old Babylonian period, c. 1850-1595 BC.¹¹ Image courtesy of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.



Figure 9. Cylinder seal and imprint, Late Old Babylonian or Kassite period, c. 1600-1400 BC.¹² Image courtesy of the British Museum.

Plaques from the same time period depict Nergal holding the scimitar (or sometimes a double-lion-head scimitar or mace) close to his chest. For example, a plaque from Kish near Tell al-Uhaymir (Iraq) and dating to the early second millennium BC (and now in the Ashmolean Museum) is representative of this depiction (see Figure 10).

¹¹ Staatliche Museen zu Berlin VA 08462.

¹² British Museum 132841.



Figure 10. Terracotta plaque of Nergal From Kish near Tell al-Uhaymir in modern Iraq, early Second Millennium BC. Image courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum.

Various other objects likewise display the lion-head scimitar, such as on the shields of model chariots found at several sites such as Mashkan-shapir (Tell Abu Duwari) in central Mesopotamia and Ur in the south.¹³ During the first millennium BC Nergal's symbol is found commonly on Neo-Babylonian boundary stones (*kudurru*) and magical tablets.¹⁴ From lower to upper Mesopotamia, the objects reveal that Nergal's cultic symbols remained the same, although frequently placed with symbols of other gods depending on local conditions.

There is no doubt that there is a long tradition of the lion as Nergal's companion and as a central feature of his iconography. It is possible, however, that the animal head on the coin of Elagabalus is that of a dog, given the creature's long snout. The identification of a dog atop the scimitar would make sense given that the animal was recognized as a companion of Nergal during the Roman imperial period. Jacob of Seruḡ uses the epithet 'The Lord with His Dogs' to describe the god worshipped at Harran,¹⁵ an epithet equally applicable to Heracles-Nergal at Hatra (see below). In terms of historical chronology, the inclusion of the dog in the iconography of Nergal is likely the mid to late Achaemenid period.¹⁶ If there was a change from lion to dog on the scimitar, it would be during this time. Evidence from Palmyra, however, only associates Nergal with the lion. Dogs are completely absent in depictions of the god. Thus, the connection might be a northern Mesopotamian phenomenon. Finally, while it is possible that the animal on the coin of Elagabalus is a dog, it should be noted that coins depicting lions with pointed snouts are common enough.

Snakes also are found on Edessene coins minted for Caracalla and Elagabalus, but their appearances do not align with the object in question. As a point of comparison, we need only to examine the serpents on the reverse of two coins for Elagabalus, on which they are long and thin with a small (earless or hornless) head and forked tongue projecting from their mouths or with an open mouth (see Figures 11-12). Moreover, none appear on the obverse. They accompany Tyche, who likely has taken on the role of Tyche-Hygeia/Salus. Another identity for this goddess, such as Atargatis, is also possible, however.

¹³ Stone (1993): 87-88, 90-93, and fig. 4a-d. Nergal was the patron deity of Mashkan-shapir, and his symbol is often found accompanying the solar disc of Shamash or a crescent and dot/star of Suen/Nanna and Ishtar.

¹⁴ For example, in Berlin see Staatliche Museen VA 3031 and VA 00203. For an example of a magical text with this image, see Wiggerman (2018): 877-99 for the late Babylonian text BM 33055.

¹⁵ Jacob of Seruḡ writes, 'He [Satan] put Apollo as idol in Antioch and others with him. In Edessa he set Nebo and Bel together with many others. He led astray Harran [Carrhae] by Sîn, Ba'alšamên and Bar Nemrê, by my Lord with his Dogs and the goddesses Tar'atha and Gadlat.' Cf. Drijvers (1980): 38 and 43, Landersdorfer (1914): 19f. II.51-54, and Vandenhoff (1915): 236ff.

¹⁶ Dirven (2009): 66 and 68 and Drijvers (1978): n. 44-45 point to the Parthian period.



Figure 11. Elagabalus, Edessa, AE assarion, c. AD 218-221.¹⁷ Image courtesy of SNG Newcastle online.



Figure 12. Elagabalus, Edessa, AE tetrassarion, c. AD 218-221.¹⁸ Image courtesy of Savoca Coins.

Thus far I have provided a brief cultural history of the symbol and its association with Nergal and established its free-floating placement in the field as a late Neo-Babylonian period development. So, what are we to make of the presence of this traditional symbol on this coin, and how do we interpret it? Answering this question depends on understanding Nergal's powers and responsibilities.

NERGAL AND HIS FUNCTIONS

Nergal was a war god whose cult center was the city of Kutha in central Mesopotamia (about 25 miles north-east of Babylon). From the Akkadian to Neo-Assyrian periods (c. 2300-612 BC) his cultic presence and influence expanded throughout Mesopotamia, Syria and the Levant, and Cilicia, Cappadocia, and Anatolia (and even further afield). As his popularity and cult grew, he maintained his connection to war, but also came to be associated with disease, death, and eventually became 'Lord of the Underworld' by the mid-second millennium BC.¹⁹ In the process he syncretized to varying degrees with a number of local deities who had the same or similar functions within their

¹⁷ SNG Newcastle 838, 19mm, 4.0g, 6h.

¹⁸ Savoca Coins eBay auction, 5 Sept. 2015, lot ZZZ3348, 24mm, 11.2g. Cf. *BMC* 65, 23.0mm, 12.48g, 12h; Classical Numismatic Group Triton Auction XIV, A.K. coll., lot 563, coin G043, 24.0mm, 9.16g, 12h; Numismatik Naumann eBay auction, 9 June 2016, HN0157, 25.0mm, 10.5g; Yale 1938.6000.1808, 23.5mm, 9.49g, 12h.

¹⁹ For a broader study of Nergal in his Syro-Mesopotamian (pre-Greek) context, see von Weiher (1971): 3-115. See also Sauren (1983) and Wiggermann (1998-2001d and 1998-2001e). The earliest extant literary evidence of Nergal as god of the underworld is the story of 'Nergal and Ereshkigal,' which dates to approximately 1500-1300 BC. Originally only Ereshkigal ruled the underworld.

own pantheons. For example, there are Meslamta-ea, Lugal-Irra (Erra), and Ninurta in Mesopotamia; Resheph in Canaan (especially in Ebla and Ugarit), Cyprus, and Cilicia; Melqart in Tyre; Sandan in Tarsus; and throughout the Near East during the Hellenistic, Parthian, and Roman imperial periods, Heracles (whom I address in more detail below). In some cases Nergal fully absorbed other gods' names and functions (such as Meslamta-ea and Lugal-Irra/Erra). He also maintained an independent cult presence in communities where syncretism with a local deity occurred, such as at Tarsus in Cilicia where 4th century BC numismatic evidence reveals a NRGLTRZ, Nergal of Tars, even as Sandan took on some of Nergal's characteristics.²⁰

In general, Nergal's representation and his symbols varied from community to community, shaped by both tradition and contemporary interests or trends. Yet, there were some standardized features that developed during the first millennium BC. Widespread commonalities likely were due to adoption of particular (i.e., official) versions of the cult during Neo-Assyrian imperial expansion. As a state god, there was political appeal and advantage in adopting a Nergal cult patronized by the Assyrian and later Babylonian kings. While some of these features persisted from the early Bronze Age, many were novelties or reinterpretations of the god's functions and powers brought about by widespread cultural, political, or social changes in the region as well as encounters with localism.

Nergal typically appears as a bearded man wearing a long garment and either a flat, horned cap or a high tiara. Early representations depict him with a mace, large bow, arrow, and dagger, but later he also possesses an axe or double-axe, a mace or scepter with two lion heads, or a lion-head scimitar.²¹ As is evident, Nergal is associated with the lion, and is frequently depicted standing on the back of a lion, lion-dragon, or another leonine creature. In addition, Nergal (as Erra) is identified with the planet Mars, and omens involving that planet are predominantly pessimistic.²² The Neo-Babylonians associated Nergal with the constellation 'Twins,' or Gemini in the Greco-Roman tradition.²³ The two figures are Lugal-Irra and Meslamta-ea, two personae of Nergal.²⁴

Nergal is the embodiment of destructive power in the cosmos, be it disease, fire, violence, war, or the noon and summer sun that causes annihilation or death. In this role he associated with and received help from a variety of demons, most notably the Sebittu, 'The Seven', a group of seven powerful demons or gods (depending on the source). He was not just an agent of chaos though.

²⁰ Jenkins (1973). For a broader discussion, see Ehling (2004a), A. Mastroncinque (2007), Pohl (2004), and Rutherford (2017).

²¹ Wiggermann (1998-2001): 222 also describes the scimitar as a 'bashmu-headed scimitar.' The bashmu is depicted as an enormous horned snake with two foreclaws and wings or as a horned snake-headed creature with lion claws, wings, and talons for feet. It is equated to the constellation Hydra. It is associated with the god Ningishzida, a chthonic god known as 'Lord of pastures and fields' who traveled to the underworld during the period when plants and crops do not grow. He guarded the underworld and served as a judge there. He was the son of Ninazu, another underworld god who eventually syncretized with and was replaced by Nergal. Thus, some local traditions made Ningishzida the son of Ereshkigal and Nergal. Wiggermann notes that Ningishzida's symbol is the sickle-sword or scimitar (370-71). There is little evidence that his cult survived into the first millennium BCE. Thus, it is very unlikely that the object before Elagabalus refers to Ningishzida.

²² Baigent (2015 (1994)): ch. 12, Belmonte (2018), Brown (2000), von Weiher (1971): 76ff, and Wiggermann (1998-2001): 222-3.

²³ Wallenfells (1994): 33, no. 154, and Wiggermann (1998-2001): 224

²⁴ See Reiner and Pingree (1998): 195. While in the Greco-Roman tradition, Castor and Pollux/Polydeuces made up the duo, there was no agreement regarding the composition of the Twins in Neo-Babylonian tradition. For example, one version has Nergal and the moon-god Sin as twin brothers (Green (1992): 154 and 156), while a commentary on Gilgamesh has Sin as Lugal-Irra and Gilgamesh as Meslamta-ea (Wiggermann (1998-2001): 155, and George (2003): 129). Other evidence suggests Nabu and Nergal as the two gods (Wallenfells (1993): 283).

He was also the enforcer of the divine will of the supreme god, be it Enlil, Marduk, Ashur, etc. Among mortals, rituals and prayers could redirect his destructive power, thus attributing to him a protective function. Mesopotamian magical traditions regarding Nergal tend to be apotropaic in nature or attempt to harness his power.²⁵

He has an important place in Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian political ideology. So long as the king received the support of the gods, Nergal protected the royal person and his position as divinely sanctioned (and helped to maintain the status quo). Both he and the storm-god Adad supported the king in war.²⁶ Nergal's standard led Neo-Assyrian armies, in which it was said that the god himself was a 'protective standard'.²⁷ Yet, Nergal was also called 'the Lord of Peace', punishing those who violated it, just as he punished those who forswore oaths altogether.²⁸ Thus, Nergal was a god of war and peace.

NERGAL AT EDESSA AND HARRAN

What do we know of Nergal's presence and functions at Edessa and neighboring Harran/Carrhae? There are few archaeological excavations of Edessa itself, but work throughout the region has produced a small corpus of inscriptions pertaining to Edessene religious life that are mostly allusive (onomastic/theophoric evidence) with regard to the city's pantheon.²⁹ Despite their polemical character, a few Christian texts provide some clarity. All point to Nebo/Nabu and Bel as the principal deities of the city. The *Doctrina Addai* mentions also Bath Nikkal, Tar'atha [Atargatis], the eagle, the sun and moon.³⁰ Moses of Chorene lists 'Naboc [Nebo], Bel, Patnicagh [Bath Nikkal], and Tarata [Atargatis]'.³¹ Jacob of Seruġ states the Edessenenes worshipped Nebo and Bel 'together with many others'.³² Both the *Doctrina Addai* and Jacob's text, however, discuss Edessa alongside Harran not just as *comparanda* but as having a shared, interconnected pantheon. Addai states, '... there are those among you who adore Bath Nikkal, as the inhabitants of Harran, your neighbors...also the sun and the moon, as the rest of the inhabitants of Harran, who are as yourselves [italics mine].' Jacob notes, 'He [Satan] led astray Harran [Carrhae] by Sîn, Ba'alšamên [Ba'al] and Bar Nemrê [Shamash or Nusku], by my Lord with his Dogs [Nergal] and the goddesses Tar'atha [Atargatis] and Gadlat [Gad or Tyche].' Relying on evidence from Hatra, several scholars identify Nergal as Jacob's 'my Lord with his Dogs' (see below). Nergal's presence at Harran is long standing, and one can assume with some confidence that his cult at Edessa was likewise old and important.

At Sultantepe (about mid-way [approximately 10 miles] between Edessa and Harran), the discovery of a unique Neo-Assyrian account of Nergal and Ereshkigal and fragments of the Poem of Erra gives evidence that Nergal was worshipped in the region. The liturgical nature of parts of these texts indicates not only that locals were familiar with Nergal and his rites but also, as scholars

²⁵ See Ellis (1968), and Reiner (1960).

²⁶ Von Weiher (1971): 15-20 and 70-73, and Wiggermann (1998-2001): 221.

²⁷ Wiggermann (1998-2001): 216.

²⁸ Wiggermann (1998-2001): 222.

²⁹ Cf. Drijvers (1980) chapter 2 for an overview of the sources and their limitations.

³⁰ *Doctrina Addai* 14 and 22.

³¹ Moses of Chorene 2, 27.

³² Jacob of Seruġ, Homily 1, 52. For additional sources, see *The Acts of Sharbel* 41, which mentions Nebo and Bel, and *Apology of Ps.-Melito*, which likewise gives attention to the cult of Nebo. Cf. Drijvers (1980): 33-39.

note, that the story of Nergal and Ereshkigal was altered and read/performed to satisfy local tastes.³³ More important is D. S. Rice's discovery of four inscriptions of Nabonidus (the penultimate Neo-Babylonian king who exiled himself at Harran for a decade) at the Great Mosque in 1956. Devoted to the moon-god Sîn and the rebuilding of his temple, Nabonidus invokes a group of gods protecting him while at Harran. In H2 column I, line 30, the list consists of Sîn, Shamash, Ishtar, Adda (Hadad), and Nergal (a second mention in column III, line 31 adds Nusku to this group).³⁴ It is close in composition to the group of gods mentioned a millennium later by Jacob of Seruḡ in the 4th century AD. Nergal's cultic presence may be further strengthened by the presence of symbols (control marks) on the tetradrachms of Seleucus I Nicator minted at Harran/Carrhae: a labrys (double-axe) and a collared dog (symbols that later are associated with Nergal).³⁵ Finally, it should be noted that in many Mesopotamian communities, there was a close relationship between Nergal and Nanna/Sîn, with a number of traditions identifying them as siblings/twins.

CONTEMPORARY EVIDENCE: NERGAL AT HATRA AND PALMYRA

While evidence is allusive for the cult of Nergal at Edessa and Harran, there is nothing concrete to indicate clearly his presence in those cities during the Roman imperial period other than Jacob's mention. At Hatra, however, material remains attest to Nergal's cult, iconography, and powers in the first through third centuries AD. Excavations uncovered several objects confirming a connection between Nergal and the Heracles figure. Thus, scholars generally refer to the god as Nergal-Heracles. Along with these objects are several inscriptions with 'Nergal Kalba' (*nrgl* or *nrgwl klb*): 'Lord of Dogs' or 'Nergal the Dog', 'Nergal Dahashpata' (*nrgl dhšpt*: 'Lord of the Guard' or 'Executioner'), as well as the so-called 'Cerberus-relief', which shows Nergal holding three dogs on leashes or chains and a lion beneath them.³⁶ Dirven argues that Nergal Kalba and Nergal Dahashpata and Jacob's 'my Lord with his Dogs' have the same meaning.³⁷ Why Nergal is associated with a dog is uncertain, but Dirven argues that the animal in Iranian tradition is connected to both guarding/protecting and the underworld, two spheres traditionally connected to Nergal.³⁸ In addition, at Hatra evidence was found that characterizes Nergal-Heracles as 'Gad of the Gate' (*gd' dy 'bwl*), combining the role of fortune or Tyche and that of a guardian.³⁹ In short, he has a liminal role in mediating the civilized interior with the uncivilized outside and assuring the security and prosperity of the city. He is also

³³ Gurney (1960). For the Poem of Erra, see Cagni (1977), Bodi (1991): 52, and Lloyd and Gökçe (1953).

³⁴ Gadd (1958): 59 (Nabonidus H2 A 30) and 65 (Nabonidus H2 C 31), and Rice (1957).

³⁵ It is likely that at Carrhae the association between Nergal and the dog already existed when Seleucus I established a mint there. Mint marks depicting both a dog's head with collar and possibly a dangling bell as well as a bipennis/labrys on tetradrachms perhaps suggest the cult's presence and symbolic connection had already existed, thus indicating an Achaemenid period origin for Nergal as 'Lord with His Dogs'. Given the presence of the crescent and star on Seleucus' tetradrachms, we can conclude that the bipennis/labrys and dog also have religious significance. For the bipennis/labrys, see Houghton and Lorber (2002) = SC 42.1, 42.3a-b; for the collared dog, see SC 42.6. As a point of comparison, Dirven (2009): 53-54 and n. 21 notes that at Hatra all representations of a god with an axe, which she identifies as Nergal, also feature dogs. At Palmyra, Seyrig (1944): 65-67 tentatively argues that the bipennis (labrys) found on a few tesserae is a symbol of Nergal at Palmyra. although Kaizer (2000): 223 sees it as hvpothetical.

³⁶ For a concise overview, see Dirven (2009): 53-55. See inscriptions H70-1, 81, 145, 179, 295, and 339 in Aggoula (1990), Greenfield (1988), Kaizer, (2000a): 223-24, Kaizer (2000b): 237 and 243, Kaizer (2007), and al-Salihi (1971)

³⁷ Dirven (2009): 68.

³⁸ See Dirven (2009): 63-68. In addition, she notes that Nergal-Heracles is associated with drinking and banquets likely celebrating or commemorating the dead (62).

³⁹ Kaizer (2000): 231, and al-Salihi (1982).

evoked in the domestic sphere as the protector of the household. Dirven concludes that Nergal's appearance and some features changed, but his traditional functions and powers persisted.

Regarding Palmyra, Nergal's presence is certainly attested, but his form and functions are not clear and are a matter of debate. Almost all evidence are tesserae, which are sometimes difficult to interpret. Relying on two tesserae Seyrig argues that Nergal took on Heracles' symbols. One (Seyrig n° 11) has a club on one side and the name *nrgl* on the other. Another tessera has a club of Heracles on one side and a god wearing a kalathos and holding a bipennis/labrys (Seyrig n° 10). Seyrig identifies Nergal on other tesserae (n°s 12-16) as a bearded god wearing a kalathos, holding a bipennis/labrys, and associated with a lion.⁴⁰ Kaizer is skeptical of the association between the club and Nergal, arguing that Heracles could fit with several other deities at Palmyra.⁴¹ The tessera with the club and name *nrgl* does not indicate a direct identification, but likely an affiliation, as the club is found on two other tesserae with a lyre as well as on a relief in the temple of Nebu.⁴² While much scholarly attention is given to identifying the gods of Palmyra's pantheon and the divine relationships, little is known about the gods' and goddesses' functions and powers other than what we know about each deity elsewhere. Given that localities reinterpret divinities for local needs, this comparative approach may impose a hierarchy and responsibilities that do not exist at Palmyra. Nonetheless, we can confirm Nergal's place there and that he may have maintained all or some of his traditional powers, but little more than that.

SYMBOL OF NERGAL ON THE COIN OF ELAGABALUS: NUMISMATIC AND ICONOGRAPHIC CONTEXTS AND INTERPRETATION

Edessa was located on the eastern frontier of the Roman empire, and its coinage served as a valuable medium to communicate both a sense of imperial belonging and localism.⁴³ Its citizens' symbolic universe operated within Syro-Mesopotamian, Greco-Roman, Parthian, and other cultural matrices, and objects, rituals, dress, social performances, space, and even the gods themselves involved significant levels of polysemy, code-switching, re-signifying, and synthesis.⁴⁴ The medallion tetrassarion of Elagabalus was subject to and the product of such processes. The coin communicates neither a single message nor can it be interpreted in isolation from its numismatic context. Thus, it is necessary to identify other coins produced in tandem with it, those possessing competing or complementary imagery and symbols, and the various themes depicted.

The coin in question was issued as part of a large series of small, medium and large bronzes that celebrated the refoundation of the Edessa as ΚΟΛΩΝΙΑ ΜΑΡΚΙΑ ΕΔΕΚΚΑ, ΜΑΡΚΙΑ ΑΥΦΗΛΙΑ ΑΝΤΩΝΙΝΙΑΝΑ ΕΔΕΚΚΑ, or ΜΑΡΚΙΑ ΑΥΦΗΛΙΑ ΑΝΤΩΝΙΝΙΑΝΑ ΚΟΛΩΝΙΑ ΕΔΕΚΚΑ. This is the first time we see the title ΜΑΡΚΙΑ included in the civic ethnonym. It appears that the city continued to advertise the titles ΑΥΦΗΛΙΑ ΑΝΤΩΝΙΝΙΑΝΑ established under Caracalla. It erased, however, evidence of its refoundation under Macrinus. The title ΟΠΕΛΛΙΑ ΜΑΚΡΙΝΙΑ found on the coins of Macrinus are not seen on issues for Elagabalus.

⁴⁰ Seyrig (1944): 62-66.

⁴¹ Kaizer (2000): 229-30.

⁴² Kaizer (2000): 230.

⁴³ For more on Edessa, see Ross (2001).

⁴⁴ For an overview of how these phenomena affect religious life and belief, see the essays in Dirven (1999 and 2015); Gastorini, Patzelt, et al. (2020) (particularly Degelmann, Rieger, and Urciuoli); and Kaizer (2000a).

In general, the reverse iconography on these coins for Elagabalus is commonplace. Small issues maintain a bust of Tyche found on issues under Caracalla and Macrinus, while medium and large issues have the typical depiction of the Tyche of Antioch: Tyche wearing a mural crown, chiton, and himation seated on rocks facing left, leaning back on her left hand and holding fruit, a flower, a branch, or incense in her extended right hand. Below the rocks is a river-god swimming right, his head turned upwards (see figures 13-14).



Figure 13. Elagabalus, Edessa, AE assarion, c. AD 218-20.⁴⁵ Image courtesy of Savoca Coins.



Figure 14. Elagabalus, Edessa, AE tetrassarion, c. AD 218-20.⁴⁶ Image courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

On the coins above, the use of the accusative case *AYTKANTWNEINON* on the small issue, and the civic ethnonym and the artistic style of the large issues support the placement of the medallic tetrassarion in this series.⁴⁷

Also in the group is a series of large bronzes with Nike, Marsyas, and a cornucopia on the reverse (see figures 15-17). Collectively they provide a narrative of victory, re-foundation, and prosperity that further communicates Elagabalus's legitimacy, Edessa's relationship with the emperor, and its primacy over the cities of Osrhoene and Roman Mesopotamia (no other cities boasted a renewed colonial status under Elagabalus). The most common of these coins are those with Nike— over the course of Elagabalus' reign Edessa produced at least eight different issues with Nike crowning Tyche,

⁴⁵ Savoca Coins 5th blue auction, 9 August 2019, lot 441, 18.0mm, 2.90g. Cf. Auctiones e-auction 63, lot 46, 18.0mm, 2.79g, 6h; Bibliothèque nationale de France GF 2019, 3.29g; BMC 44, 18.0mm, 3.01g, 6h; Lindgren III, 1562, 18.0mm, 3.0g; Savoca Coins eBay auction, 12 Feb 2019, item LLL0567, 18.0mm, 2.87g.

⁴⁶ Bibliothèque nationale de France FG 2035, 13.38g. Cf. Savoca Coins 100th silver auction, 18 April, 2021, lot 263, 28.0mm, 15.47g; Xarioteer eBay auction, 2 August 2014, item 433, 28.0mm.

⁴⁷ Interestingly, there are three specimens of the coin in figure 13 known to the author, which use only a single obverse die (and two reverse dies). It is possible that it is a companion to the medallic tetrassarion.

and one where Nike decorates the shield of Elagabalus, who also holds a scepter and has his right hand raised (*adlocutio*).⁴⁸ There are at least five different issues with a cornucopia, and three with Marsyas, all of which belong to the earliest group of coins minted at Edessa.⁴⁹



Figure 15. Elagabalus, Edessa, AE tetrassarion, c. AD 218-220.⁵⁰ Image courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group.



Figure 16. Elagabalus, Edessa, AE tetrassarion, c. AD 218-220.⁵¹ Image courtesy of Roma Numismatics.



Figure 17. Elagabalus, Edessa, AE tetrassarion, c. AD 218-220.⁵² Image courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France.

⁴⁸ For the issue depicting the imperial *adlocutio*, see BMC 77, 21mm, 7.86g, 12h.

⁴⁹ For a study of the Marsyas type and other related issues on the coinage of Edessa, see Le Blanc (2021): in particular, 160-61, 163-64, 171-75. I wish to thank the author for providing me an advance copy of her article.

⁵⁰ CNG Electronic auction 315, 20 November 2013, lot 280, 25mm, 10.12g, 12h. For additional specimens, see BMC 64, pl. XV.2, 24.0mm, 10.82g, 12h; Gert Boersema VCoins website, item 5315, 24.0mm, 10.6g; Forum Ancient Coins VCoins website, 9695, 25.5mm, 12.18g, 12h; SNG Hunterian 2526, 25.0mm, 13.47g, 12h; SNG Newcastle 835, 24.0mm, 11.16g, 12h; Yale 1938.6000.1807, 26.9mm, 11.84g, 6h.

⁵¹ Roma Numismatics VCoins website, item 3404, 26.0mm, 11.07g. For additional specimens, see BnF FG 2033, 14.39g; Pavlos Pavlou VCoins website, RPC 1769, 25.3mm, 13.17g, 6h; SNG Hunterian 2534, 27.0mm, 14.43g, 6h; SNG Hunterian 2538, 26.0mm, 13.48g, 12h; VAuctions 328, 15 December 2017, lot 359, 26.0mm, 13.8g, 12h.

⁵² Bibliothèque nationale de France FG 2029, 12.45g. For other specimens, see BMC 60, 26.0mm, 13.07g, 6h; BMC 61, pl. XV.1, 26.0mm, 11.35g, 6h; BMC 62, 25.0mm, 14.2, 6h; BMC 63, 24.5, 10.78g, 6h; BnF FG 2025, 11.62g; BnF FG 2034, 12.45g; BnF AA.GR 5148, 12.66g; Classical Numismatic Group electronic auction 205, lot 340, 24.0mm; Classical Numismatic Group electronic auction 306, lot 316, 26.0mm, 14.18g, 6h; Kölner auction 108, 7 April 2018, Grever coll., lot 225, 13.94g; Yale 1939.6000.1804, 25.9mm, 9.96g, 12h.

Moreover, there are four different issues with a serpent accompanying Tyche on the reverse (evoking the image of Tyche-Hygeia/Salus; see figure 10 and 11 above for examples), with the message likely appealing for the good health of the emperor as much as for the community itself.

While recognizing that the predominance of a traditionally Greco-Roman iconography in this series indicates a strong expression of imperial belonging, we should take caution not to interpret these symbols and images exclusively through a Greco-Roman lens distinct from local context. For example, the seated goddess, traditionally interpreted as the Tyche of Edessa and based on Eutychides of Sicyon's Tyche of Antioch, could be in some scenes Astarte, Atargatis, or another local goddess, or a synthesis of Tyche and another goddess. Thus Nike, Marsyas, a cornucopia, or serpent could take on different meanings with each goddess, as each of these goddesses had different roles and functions within the Edessene pantheon.⁵³ Moreover, they are occasionally paired with symbols recognizable within Syro-Mesopotamian traditions or hybrid images, local images whose identification is lost to us, or as a series of coins (as is the case with the tetrassarion with the Nergal symbol and the coins above). Among these the most common image and emblematic of Edessa itself is a Hellenic distyle temple (likely that of Marduk, Nebo, or both) within which is a cultic stone or cube set upon a table. The earliest example is found on a tetrachalkon of Wa'el, who usurped the Edessene throne from Ma'nu in AD 163 (see figure 18).



Figure 18. Wa'el, Edessa, AE tetrachalkon, c. AD 163-65.⁵⁴ Image courtesy of the British Museum.

Yet, it was not until after Caracalla's annexation of the kingdom in AD 212-13 that we see this temple again on tetradrachms minted in Edessa.⁵⁵ We find the same temple on tetradrachms minted for Elagabalus, but also on a diassarion in between two facing busts of civic Tychai (see figure 19). The cubic stone is seen within the temple. It is uncertain what city accompanies Edessa (most likely Samosata, given that nearly the same design is found on some of its coins) in this image, or if these are two other goddesses.

⁵³ For the religion of Edessa, see Drijvers (1980).

⁵⁴ BMC 2, pl. XIII.7, 19.0mm, 9.23g, 10h. Cf. Ashmolean 11169, 20.0mm, 7.02g; BMC 3, pl. XIII.8, 6.63g; Bibliothèque nationale de France 1966.453, 11.35g; BnF Luynes 3469, 8.63g, 6h; Leu Numismatik auction 4, 25 May 2019, lot 398, 22.0mm, 7.61g, 5h; Münzen und Medaillen auction 20, 10 October 2006, lot 927, 22.0mm, 9.01g.

⁵⁵ Cf. Bellinger (1940): nos. 134-41, and Prieur (2000): nos. 845-50. The temple is also on the tetradrachms for Macrinus and Diadumenian; cf. Bellinger (1940): nos. 142-51, and Prieur (2000): nos. 851-68. For the dating of the annexation of the kingdom of Osrhoene, see Dandrow (2016): 200-2.



Figure 19. Elagabalus, Edessa, AE diassarion, c. AD 218-220.⁵⁶ Image courtesy of Münzen und Medaillen, GmbH.

The temple is commonly found on issues for Severus Alexander, Julia Mamaea, Gordian III, Tranquillina, and Trajan Decius. It is frequently held by the seated goddess and also accompanied by an uncertain god standing above the goddess or on a pedestal before the temple and goddess (for example, see figure 20).⁵⁷



Figure 20. Severus Alexander and Julia Mamaea, Edessa, AE tetrassarion, c. AD 222-35.⁵⁸ Image courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group.

Interestingly we find decorating the shield of Severus Alexander the façade or three-fourths representation of a Syro-Mesopotamian-style temple, within which is a small cubic object (see figure 21). It is likely that this is the same temple seen above, but alternatively depicted. As is frequently attested in discussions of ancient coinage, verisimilitude is not paramount, and local audiences likely would have recognized both depictions as the same temple housing the cultic object central to Edessene religious life, thus further re-enforcing a local culture that saw the mixture of Greek, Roman, Iranian, and Syro-Mesopotamian (among others) symbols and imagery as common.

⁵⁶ Münzen und Medaillen, Auction 27, 28 May 2008, lot 2259, 6.16g. Cf. Babelon (1893), group 2, 51. For additional examples, see BMC 69, pl. XV.4, 22.0mm, 7.47g, 8h; BMC 70, 21.0mm, 7.11g, 12h; BMC 71, 21.5mm, 6.31g, 6h; Bibliothèque nationale de France FG 2037, 6.0g; BnF FG 2039, 6.39g; BnF M 5524, 6.64g; Classical Numismatic Group electronic auction 254, lot 219, 21.0mm, 6.38g, 12h; SNG Hunterian 2539, 21.0mm, 7.33g, 12h; SNG Hunterian 2540, 24.0mm, 4.82g, 6h. For the tetradrachms of Elagabalus from Edessa, see Bellinger (1940): nos. 152-55, and Prieur (2000): nos. 1719-27.

⁵⁷ For a discussion of the identity of this standing god, see Le Blanc (2021): 161, 164-71.

⁵⁸ Classical Numismatic Group, electronic auction 325, lot 474, 29.0mm, 17.76g, 12h.



Figure 21. Severus Alexander, Edessa, AE diassarion, c. AD 222-35.⁵⁹ Image from author's collection.

The polysemic nature of Edessa's 'hybrid', borderland/middle-ground culture is further seen on a tetrassarion of Elagabalus in figure 22. The coin itself belongs to the same large issue as that of our medallic tetrassarion. Here we see a traditional Roman military representation of the emperor on the obverse and the traditional 'Tyche' on the reverse with a cornucopia behind her. The shield that Elagabalus holds typically has a gorgoneion on it, but the engraver has modified that image into a cubic object within which is a circle and dot, and around it there are dangling serpents (the gorgon's hair unmodified). It is uncertain if the engraver intended to equate the cubic object with the apotropaic gorgoneion, although this is likely. It is possible that it is the cubic object from the temple with a round baetyl within it. Regardless, there is no comparable symbol or image found in traditional Greco-Roman iconography. The local meaning for this symbol is lost to us, however.



Figure 22. Elagabalus, Edessa, AE tetrassarion, c. AD 218-220.⁶⁰ Image from author's collection.

Overall, the examination of the temple coins highlights the cultural environment and broad iconographic lexicon in which the medallic tetrassarion of Elagabalus was produced and interpreted. While the symbol of Nergal stands out because of its free placement on the obverse, Edessa's coinage depicts other Syro-Mesopotamian cultic symbols and images that undercut any view of Edessa's self-presentation through her coinage as exclusively a Greco-Roman community.

⁵⁹ Author's coll. = Gert Boersema VCoins website, item 5793, 26.5mm, 8.65g, 12h.

⁶⁰ Author's coll. = Cody111111 eBay sale, 11 August, 2017, 28.0mm, 14.92g, 7h.

How are we to interpret the presence of Nergal's scimitar on the obverse? Sometimes symbols and objects accompanying the imperial bust on coins highlight the deeds, actions, or responsibilities of the emperor. In this light Nergal's presence could highlight Elagabalus' victory over Macrinus (as well as his military command over the Roman legions in Syria and Mesopotamia), and the subsequent re-founding of Edessa as Colonia Markia. The presence of Nike and Marsyas on the reverse undermines such an interpretation. Frequently, however, symbols and objects on the obverse represent an emperor's power or ability comparable to that of or originating from a particular deity, or it stands for a divinity who legitimates or supports the emperor. As the lion-head of the scimitar faces the same direction as the emperor's bust, there is a jugate quality to the image, which is found commonly enough on both imperial and provincial coinage. In many cases, the jugate god is the one who legitimates the emperor or serves as his protector/companion (i.e., the Genius, Tyche, or Gad of the emperor). Evidence from Hatra refers to Nergal-Heracles as Gad (Tyche or Fortune), whose responsibilities are principally protective and apotropaic: guarding the gates of the city, thus the city itself and its kings, and warding off disease and evils. Given Edessa's cultural similarities with Hatra, it is probable that Nergal had the same responsibilities and that likely a long-standing affiliation between that god and the Abgarid kings existed. If this were true, then following the abolition of the Abgarid monarchy in AD 212/13 the Edessenes replaced the king with the Roman emperor in this relationship. This would be a novel re-configuration of a local, traditional practice. Overall, the medalllic tetrassarion communicates the community's aspirations for the health and welfare of Elagabalus by invoking Nergal as the personal protector/companion to the emperor.

A QUESTION OF HERACLES' BOW

Finally, a counter-argument that must be addressed is that the object in question is a stag- or deer-head version of Heracles' bow, such as that found, for example, on the coins of Hypaepa in Lydia, Sebaste in Phrygia, or Selge in Pisidia. (see figures 23-26).



Figure 23. Pseudo-autonomous, Hypaepa, Phrygia, AE, Reign of Hadrian (AD 117-38).⁶¹ Image courtesy of Roman Provincial Coinage online.

⁶¹ RPC III, 2027 = Classical Numismatic Group mail-bid sale 81, 20 May 2009, lot 781, 15.0mm, 2.77g; cf. BMC 1.



Figure 24. Pseudo-autonomous, Sebaste, Phrygia, AE, c. AD 100-150.⁶² Image courtesy of Roman Provincial Coinage online.



Figure 25. Selge, Pisidia, AE, c. 200-100 BC.⁶³ Image courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group.



Figure 26. Marcus Aurelius as Caesar, Selge, Pisidia, AE assarion, c. AD 138-146.⁶⁴ Image courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group.

If we accept this identification, it would appear that Edessa sought to depict either the new emperor as *Neos Heraklēs* or to symbolize the Greek hero as a companion, protector, and patron of Elagabalus.⁶⁵ There are few factors, however, that undermine this interpretation. Firstly, there is

⁶² RPC III, 2603 = CGT coll. Ex Pecunem 38, 6 Dec. 2015, lot 560, 14.0mm, 1.60g, 6h; cf. BMC 10, pl. XLIII.6; SNG von Aulock 3947

⁶³ Classical Numismatic Group sale item 803745, 12.0mm, 2.37g, 1h; cf. BMC 47-50; Lindgren 1353; SNG Copenhagen 263; SNG France III, 1988-92; SNG von Aulock 5288

⁶⁴ Classical Numismatic Group electronic auction 326, lot 294, 18.0mm, 4.13g, 6h. Cf. RPC IV.3 4959 (corrected attribution from Lucius Verus to Marcus Aurelius).

⁶⁵ Since the reign of Commodus Heracles was seen as a companion, protector, or patron to the emperor (Halsberghe (1972): 87). Three Latin inscriptions from the reign of Elagabalus survive that mention Heracles. See de Arrizabalaga y Prado (2010): 123, and Halsberghe (1972): 87-88. One is an altar to Heracles to commemorate Elagabalus' *adventus* into Rome in 219 (CIL VI, 31162 = BCAR (1886): 132, no. 2). A second is a dedication to Heracles Invictus, who is described as 'Sac[ro] Conservatori Domini N[ostri] Imp[eratoris] Caes[aris] M[arci] Aureli Antonini Pii Felicis Aug[usti]', dated to 219 (AE 1917/8 (1919): 10-1, no. 44). The third inscription dating to 221/2 is a dedication to Heracles Invictus 'pro salute Dominorum nostrum Imperatoris Caesaris Marci Aurelii Antoni... et Marci Aurelii Alexandri nobilissimi Caesaris' (CIL VI, 323). In terms of sculpture of Elagabalus as Heracles, most notable is the reworked statue in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. Mastroncinque (2014): 326-29 points out that Elagabalus sought to present himself as Heracles dressed in women's clothing, most notably on the reverses of a series of denarii, in order to legitimate his appearance within a Roman framework.

neither evidence for a cult to the Greek hero Heracles at Edessa nor the adoption of his image by or assimilation with a local deity.⁶⁶ He and his symbols (club, lion skin, and bow) are not found on any coins minted at Edessa or any of the other cities in Osrhoene. Among other material evidence, such as mosaics, statues, figurines, plaques, etc. found at or near Edessa, Heracles is equally absent. This is surprising considering that material culture indicates that Heracles was known far and wide throughout the Roman Near East (but in many cases it is unclear if it is Heracles himself, the syncretism of the Greek hero and a local god, or another god in the guise of the Greek hero).

Despite the diversity of religious contexts in which the iconography of Heracles is utilized, depictions of the Greek hero became nearly standardized. We commonly find busts of the Greek hero with lion skin tied around his neck, or a full-bodied depiction with his club and lion-skin. Depictions of Heracles amid his Labors, engaged in other activities, or possessing a bow are rare. The numismatic record in the region reflects this larger trend in representation. Twenty-four cities in Cilicia, Syria, Phoenicia, Palestine/Judaea, and Arabia minted at least 130 issues depicting Heracles (as bust, full body, or club),⁶⁷ but only four communities (Aigeai, Hierapolis-Castabala, Seleucia-ad-Calycadnum, and Tarsus) each produced a single issue with Heracles possessing his bow (3.1% of all issues). Only one of these coins (Seleucia-ad-Calycadnum) has a stag/deer head.⁶⁸ This low percentage makes it unlikely that we are looking at a bow.

CONCLUSION

The medallic tetrassarion of Elagabalus from Edessa is a valuable window into the city's cultural and religious heritage. The symbol before the bust of the emperor is a free-floating scimitar associated with Nergal, the ancient Mesopotamian god of death and war as well as peace and protection. This is potentially the first piece of material evidence for the presence of the cult of Nergal in Edessa, a well-attested cult found at neighboring Carrhae, Hatra, Palmyra, and elsewhere in northern Mesopotamia. The tetrassarion was minted as part of the first large issue of coinage for Elagabalus celebrating Edessa's refoundation as *MAPKIA AYPHAIA ANTQNINIANA KOΛQNIA EΔECCA*. The simultaneous use of a variety of Greco-Roman and Syro-Mesopotamian symbols on the coins indicate a local culture that looks both to the east and west for meaning. The scimitar of Nergal serves double duty by communicating a regional cultural koine as well as incorporating the Roman emperor within a local system of legitimation. Moreover, while potentially highlighting the Elagabalus' martial powers, the coin appeals to Nergal as a companion-deity to protect the emperor.

⁶⁶ For the religion of Edessa, see Drijvers (1980). For a broader discussion, see Drijvers (1977).

⁶⁷ The cities in Cilicia are Aigeai, Anazarbus, Casae, Carallia, Colybrassus, Coropissus, Diocaesarea, Flaviopolis, Hierapolis-Castabala, Irenopolis-Neronias, Isaura, Mopsus, Olba, Seleucia-ad-Calycadnum, and Tarsus; in Syria: Abila, Damascus, Gadara, Pella, Philadelphia, Seleucia-Pieria (Antioch), and possibly Heliopolis; in Phoenicia: Tyre; and in Palestine: Gaza.

⁶⁸ The author examined 1506 different coin types (a sizeable sample of Greek and Roman provincial coinage dating from approximately 100 BC to the mid 3rd century AD) with Heracles and/or one or more of his symbols reveals that the stag/deer head bow is rarely represented. In this sample there are 104 that depict Heracles' bow (6.9% of all coins), and only 30 of these represent the bow with a stag/deer head (28.8% of all bows, and 2.0% of all coin types). Furthermore, the bow (and Heracles himself) is more commonly found on coins minted in the cities of south-east Europe and western Asia Minor, but that frequency diminishes significantly the more one travels east.

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