



# THE COINAGE SYSTEM OF CLEOPATRA VII, MARC ANTONY AND AUGUSTUS IN CYPRUS

By Matthew Kreuzer

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*"If the nose of Cleopatra had been a little shorter, the whole face of the world would have been changed."*

Blaise Pascal

## Summary

During the late reign of Cleopatra VII a cornucopia of coinage circulated in Cyprus. After her defeat at Actium, coinage on a similar-scale continued with Roman types and denominations for Augustus. Coins played a role in the political and economic control of the island.

Previous writings about ancient Cypriot numismatics have focused almost solely on the island's coins, with little understanding of the dynamic economic relationship between Cyprus and her neighbors, of which coinage is a reflection. This author and Catharine Lorber are writing separate books about Ptolemaic coinage, building on the work of Svoronos.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the relationship between Ptolemaic Cypriot denominations is only now becoming understood. Coin striking is reviewed here as a manufacturing process, with focus on lowest cost and standardization. Several important conclusions are reached here, generally against the prevailing scholarship originated in the late 19th century.



1a) Tetradrachms of this period with Paphos ΠΑ mintmark are from Paphos, not Alexandria. Cyprus, with access to fuel, was a much larger metal working center than Alexandria, striking most of the coinage for the Ptolemaic Kingdom.

1b) A re-attribution of the portrait on Cleopatra's base silver tetradrachms is suggested, from Ptolemy I to Ptolemy XIII, XIV and Cleopatra VII herself.

1c) While the surfaces show a nice silver color, the net silver content of the base silver Ptolemaic tetradrachm is about equal to that of a contemporary Roman Republican denarius.

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<sup>1</sup> The introduction to Cathy Lorber's upcoming book on Ptolemaic Numismatics gives a perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of the 1904-1908 books of Svoronos.

Though it approaches its centenary, Svoronos remains the preferred reference for Ptolemaic coinage. The catalogue offers remarkably comprehensive coverage. The new varieties that I have been able to add amount to no more than 10-15% of the total, and most of these are minor variants or missing denominations from a well-documented series . . . Indeed, Svoronos cast his nets so wide that he caught up some coinages that were Ptolemaic in sentiment, but issued by non-Ptolemaic authorities. Still other entries do not belong at all in a catalogue devoted to the Ptolemies.

Of greater concern, Svoronos cannot always be relied upon for the accuracy of his classifications. Mint attributions are frequently wrong, reign attributions sometimes so; and bronzes may be wrongly associated with one another. Svoronos imagined dating systems in the early Ptolemaic coinage of Alexandria where they did not in fact exist... The preceding list of caveats is demanded by conscience, but should not be understood as denigrating Svoronos. His was a monumental achievement that stands to this day, merely broidered round the edges by subsequent scholarship.

The author of this book disagrees, and believes that the core of Svoronos deserves closer analysis and revision.

2) The Ptolemaic Cypriot bronze coinage produced by the *en chapelete* method is generally later than previously attributed by Svoronos. These coins were struck during a period of inflation. The declining average weight standard places undated issues between those of known dates, producing a Glossary of Ptolemaic coin re-attributions.



3) The famous but rare Cypriot 28 mm bronze coin of Cleopatra dates after 39 BC. The baby in Cleopatra's arms, generally taken to be Caesarion, is probably that of her son by Marc Antony, Alexander Helios.



4) A re-attribution of a common, similar 10 mm bronze coin from the portrait of Arsinöe III to Cleopatra VII is proposed.



5) Marc Antony portrait denarii with P. for the supposed artist signature can be read as P. for Paphos Mint. Other portrait denarii of Antony may have also been struck at Paphos.



6) The entire C.A and AVGVSTVS coinage of Augustus, some of which has been attributed to Asia Minor, was more likely from Cyprus. The brass and bronze coinage was struck for both internal use, and export, while Cyprus was his personal possession, not under the nominal control of the Senate, 30-22 BC. CA stands for Caesar Augustus.



7) The related good-style Augustus portrait denarii and aurei with "Young Bull" reverse are closely related to the C.A and AVGVSTVS coinage. They are also from Cyprus.



8) The Temple of Jupiter Olympus at Salamis (Zeus Salaminios) appears on similar fine style denarii of Augustus. Related silver issues are also from a Cypriot mint. All are related by style to the C.A coinage.

9) Cypriot small bronze coinage of Cleopatra circulated well into Roman times, at values of an obol equals two-thirds of an as. The late Ptolemaic types and denominations are reflected in their Roman Cypriot successors.



10) The legacy of Ptolemaic denominations and flan manufacturing extended into the first half of the second century, when Cyprus was part of the Roman Province of Syria.

“The Coinage System of Cleopatra VII, Marc Antony and Augustus in Cyprus” included several denominations. Each was struck in a political and economic context. Each reflected earlier and contemporary issues of Cyprus and her trade partners.



## Historical Background

*“Cyprus is second to none of the islands of the Mediterranean; It is rich in wine and oil, produces grain in abundance, and possesses extensive copper mines . . . .”* Strabo (64 BC - 23? AD)

Our word “Copper” may have its root in Cyprus (Kupros), which, along with grain, was a major export of the island throughout ancient times. Cyprus also provided the region with craftsmen and merchants.

Cyprus came under the rule of the Ptolemies of Egypt after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC. It was lost in 305 BC but regained in 294 BC when Ptolemy I Soter bested Demetrios Poliorketes for control of the island. Cyprus remained under the control of the Ptolemies for more than 235 years, until 58 BC when P Clodius Pulcher (brother of Appius Claudius Pulcher) persuaded the Senate to approve the annexation of the island (Lex Clodia de Cypro). The Senate sent the famed orator Cato (M. Porcius Cato) to enforce the annexation. Ptolemy the Cypriot, the Lagid, Ptolemaic Governor of Cyprus, and brother of Ptolemy XII, committed suicide rather than accept the empty honor “High Priest of Aphrodite” that Cato offered him. The loss of Cyprus was a direct cause of riots that drove Ptolemy XII out of Alexandria. He fled to Cyprus and other Roman controlled areas. Cato, appointed the first Roman governor (quaestor pro praetor) of the island, seized the treasury, presumably the real reason for Rome's interest in the island. Plutarch claimed that Cato sold the treasury for 7000 talents of silver, and that he took more treasures to Rome from Cyprus than Pompey the Great brought back from all his wars.

Cyprus was caught up in the Roman Civil Wars of the first century BC, with several of its major figures involved in some way in the island's affairs. Pompey was on the island while marshalling his forces for battle against Julius Caesar. After Pompey's defeat in 48 BC, Julius Caesar restored control of the island to Ptolemaic control, briefly under Cleopatra VII, in joint rule with her sister Arsinoë IV and her brothers Ptolemy XIII and XIV. Ptolemy XIII was drowned in 47 BC in Egypt. Ptolemy XIV was killed in 44 BC. After his death, Cleopatra became the virtual “sole” ruler of Cyprus in association with her baby son by Caesar, Caesarion, who ruled as Ptolemy XV. During the Roman Civil War, the Ptolemaic Fleet left Cyprus without Cleopatra's orders to fight on the side of Cassius but was held back by poor weather. The return of Cyprus to Cleopatra was re-confirmed by Antony in 34 BC by the “Donations of Alexandria.”

After Actium, Octavian visited Cyprus. He declared the island under his personal control, his private estate. In 22 BC Cyprus was proclaimed a Senatorial province to be ruled by a proconsular governor, still under the authority of Augustus. Other emperors followed. Claudius combined Cyprus with Syria, and it was governed from Antioch.

## Coins Circulating in Cleopatra's Cyprus, 51-30 BC

During the third century BC and continuing into the time of Cleopatra, the coinage of Cyprus closely paralleled that of Egypt, using the same denominational system of six obols per drachm. Richard Hazzard's recent work, *Ptolemaic Coins, An Introduction for Collectors*, has brought considerable clarity to the connection between bronze and silver denominations in the Ptolemaic Kingdom. In particular, his analysis of weight standards is valuable.

Tetradrachms were the principal denomination of large-scale trade. Accepted by merchants throughout the Ptolemaic holdings, a tetradrachm was extremely valuable. Hazzard notes that in 250 BC, the daily wage of a laborer was an obol. The tetradrachm would have been 24 days wage for a laborer. Comparing the ancient laborer to a modern one working at \$5.20 an hour, the tetradrachm was the equivalent of a modern \$1000 bill. While \$1000 bills may meet the needs of merchants trading large shipments of goods, individuals trading goods in quantities smaller than a wagonload needed smaller currency -particularly bronze small change.

For Ptolemaic issues before the 140's BC, the weight standard to which coins of all metals were struck is exacting. Hazzard explains that during the reign of Ptolemy II this standard for bronze in Egypt was reduced to about 72 grams per drachm, 12 grams per obol. The weight standard of the bronze obol slowly eroded over time. The term bronze is used here for both copper and copper alloy containing any tin. Cypriot bronzes of Ptolemy V with cult statue of Aphrodite on the reverse have nice round flans, fairly even strikes, and a weight variance of about 10% around the denominations (Svor. 1005 = 18g, 1006 = 12g, 1007 = 6g, 1008 = 3g, and 1009 = 1.5g). While traditionally attributed to Ptolemy III (BMC, Svoronos, Sear), this weight standard was in use 262-200 BC. The smallest denomination was the eighth-obol, or hemitetartermorion. This corresponded to the smallest denomination in silver, struck in Macedon, Greece, Ionia and elsewhere. The bronze Ptolemaic hemitetartermorion was not common.<sup>2</sup> During this time, preparation of bronze planchets still included weighing and lathing.



*This very round and evenly struck 17.82g trihemiobol (Svor. 1005) of Ptolemy III offers an interesting comparison to the later, more irregular, small bronzes.*

Later bronzes, during and after the time of Ptolemy VI, were more crudely struck on a declining obol standard which fell over decades to about 8.5 grams, or less, per obol. Flan preparation became rushed. The *en chapelete* method for casting bronze flans was adopted for smaller bronze denominations. Especially for the smaller denominations, engraving quality of legends and devices declined. Striking was rushed, resulting in more uneven strikes, flan cracks and other striking errors. Consistent weight standard was apparently less important than a generation before. The actual weights of coins of the same denomination vary. The combined effect is that the bronze coinage was less consistent and less attractive. Apparently, they continued to circulate, for coins of this time are often very worn. The exact

<sup>2</sup> The smallest Greek silver coins are usually 0.08 gram archaic and early Classical silver fractions. The hemitetartermorion was the smallest regular denomination.