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The Hieromykes on a new coin type of Dion in the Decapolis and the Stygian riverscape of Southern Syria

Achim Lichtenberger

Zusammenfassung: In dem Beitrag wird ein neuer Münztyp der Stadt Dion in der Dekapolis (heutiges Südsyrien) vorgestellt. Es handelt sich um das größte Nominal der unter Septimius Severus ausgegebenen städtischen Prägung und es zeigt einen gelagerten Flussgott. Das Münzbild wird zum Anlass genommen, einen Münztyp der Nachbarstadt Adraa zu diskutieren, der ebenfalls einen gelagerten Flussgott zeigt, der als Hieromykes identifiziert wird. Auf den Münzen von Adraa sitzt bei dem Flussgott eine weibliche Gestalt. Es handelt sich um die Personifikation der Styx. Der Unterweltsfluss wird von spätantiken Autoren in der Region lokalisiert und so wird eine stygische Flusslandschaft in Südsyrien entworfen, die auch auf den Münzen zu fassen ist.

Schlagwörter: Numismatik, griechische Städteprägungen, Dekapolis, Ikonografie

Abstract: The article presents a new coin type from the city of Dion in the Decapolis (present-day southern Syria). It is the largest denomination of the civic coinage issued under Septimius Severus and it shows a reclining river god. The new coin type is taken as the starting point to discuss a coin type from the neighboring city of Adraa, which also shows a reclining river god identified as Hieromykes. On the coins of Adraa, a female figure sits by the river god. It is the personification of Styx. The Underworld River is localized by late antique authors in this region and thus a Stygian riverscape in southern Syria is created, to which also the coinage attests.

Key words: Numismatics, Roman Provincial coinage, Decapolis, iconography

Dion

Dion was one of the cities of the Syrian Decapolis¹. Its site has not yet been properly explored, but it is generally assumed that Dion was located on Tell el-Ashari in modern southern Syria. Most of our knowledge about Dion stems from the few inscriptions from the vicinity, literary testimonies and the civic bronze coins that the city minted during the Severan period.

A new coin type of Dion

The city of Dion only minted coins under Septimius Severus and Elagabalus². Coins in the time of Septimius Severus were struck in three years, A.D. 204/205, 206/207 and 207/208. They are dated according to a Pompeian era starting in 64/63 B.C.³. Until recently only coins with portraits on the obverse of Caracalla, Geta and Iulia

Domna were known, now also coins depicting Septimius Severus on the obverse have turned up⁴. Four of these coins appeared on the art market in 2015 and 2017, raising fears that they originated from illicit excavations in this part of present-day war-torn Syria⁵.

¹ Cf. on Dion Augé 1988; Sartre 1992, 149–151; Lichtenberger 2003, 50–62; Kropp 2006; Sartre-Fauriat – Sartre 2016, 243–247.

² Spijkerman 1978, 116–121 and see the study of Augé 1988 on the emissions of Dion.

³ On the civic era of Dion cf. Stein 1990, 30–32. Relevant for establishing the starting date is an inscription found at nearby Tafas (Sartre-Fauriat – Sartre 2016, 218–219 no. 261).

⁴ It used to be something of a mystery why no coins minted for Septimius Severus were known until recently, cf. Augé 1988, 327. 333 n. 6.

⁵ On similar cases of coins that presumably stem from looting in Syria, cf. Wartenberg Kagan 2015.

The new coin type is the largest denomination of Dion, and on the reverse it depicts a hitherto unknown river god.



Fig. 1: Bronze coin of Dion, Obv. Septimius Severus, Rev. River god Hieromykes (Triton XVIII, January 6, 2015, lot 901)

Dion, A.D. 204/205 (year HEC = 268) **(fig. 1)**

AE 30 mm; 28.86 g, 12 h

Obv.: AY K Λ CEΠ CEOYHPOC; laureate, draped and cuirassed bust of Septimius Severus to r.

Rev.: ΔE[IH]NΩN KOIC HEC; reclining bearded river deity with reed in the r. hand and cornucopia in l. hand wearing reed crown to l. on overturned amphora from which water flows, tree to the l.

Triton XVIII, January 6, 2015, lot 901.



Fig. 2: Bronze coin of Dion, Obv. Septimius Severus, Rev. River god Hieromykes (Tübingen, Münzsammlung des Instituts für Klassische Archäologie, no. Müller 1241)

Dion, A.D. 206/207 (year OC = 270) **(fig. 2)**

AE 29 mm; 24.82 g, 12 h

Obv.: AY T K Λ C CEOYHPOC; laureate, draped and cuirassed bust of Septimius Severus to r.

Rev.: ΔEIHNΩN OC KOI; reclining bearded river deity with reed in the r. hand and cornucopia in l. hand wearing reed crown to l. on overturned amphora from which water flows, tree to the l.

Tübingen, Münzsammlung des Instituts für Klassische Archäologie, no. Müller 1241.

From the same dies:



Fig. 3: Bronze coin of Dion, Obv. Septimius Severus, Rev. River god Hieromykes (Jerusalem, Israel Museum, no. 2014.17.34974)



Fig. 4: Bronze coin of Dion, Obv. Septimius Severus, Rev. River god Hieromykes (Classical Numismatic Group, Auction 99, May 13, 2015, lot 485)



Fig. 5: Bronze coin of Dion, Obv. Septimius Severus, Rev. River god Hieromykes (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 394, March 29, 2017, lot 401)

- Jerusalem, Israel Museum (no. 2014.17.34974): AE 28 mm; 19.83 g; 12 h (Meshorer et al. 2013, 145 no. 8) **(fig. 3)**

- Classical Numismatic Group, Auction 99; May 13, 2015, lot 485: AE 30 mm; 27.34 g; 12 h **(fig. 4)**

- Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 394, March 29, 2017, lot 401: AE 30 mm; 22.49 g; 12 h **(fig. 5).**

Dion, A.D. 207/208 (year AOC = 271) **(fig. 6)**

AE 28 mm; 16.50 g; 12 h



Fig. 6: Bronze coin of Dion, Obv. Septimius Severus, Rev. River god Hieromykes (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 389, January 18, 2017, lot 476)





Fig. 7: Bronze coin of Dion, Obv. Caracalla, Rev. Hexastyle temple with altar ([Münster, Archäologisches Museum der Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität Münster, no. M 5860](#))



Fig. 8: Bronze coin of Dion, Obv. Geta, Rev. Horned deity ([Münster, Archäologisches Museum der Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität Münster, no. M 5863](#))



Fig. 9: Bronze coin of Dion, Obv. Geta, Rev. Athena (Jerusalem, Israel Museum no. 2015.20.35297 = Meshorer et al. 2013, pl. 134.9)



Fig. 10: Bronze coin of Dion, Obv. Lulia Domna, Rev. Tyche and river god (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 434, December 12, 2018, lot 249)

Obv.: AY K K CE CEO[YHP]OC; laureate, draped and cuirassed bust of Septimius Severus to r.
Rev.: [ΔHIH]NΩN AOC; reclining bearded river deity with reed in the r. hand and cornucopia in l. hand wearing reed crown to l. on overturned amphora from which water flows, tree to the l.

Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 389, January 18, 2017, lot 476.

The three emissions correlate with contemporary coins portraying Caracalla, Geta and Lulia Domna on the obverse together with depictions of a temple (**fig. 7**), a horned deity (**fig. 8**), Athena (**fig. 9**) and Tyche (**fig. 10**).

It is obvious that Dion wanted to cover all members of the imperial family with individual issues, and among the obverse portraits a clear distinction was made between laureate Augusti (Septimius Severus and Caracalla) and the bareheaded Caesar (Geta). Also the denomination corresponds to rank, Septimius Severus having the largest and Caracalla the second largest, followed by Geta and Lulia Domna⁶. The reason why on the latest emission Septimius Severus wears the radiate crown remains unknown, but we can assume that this kind of distinction was intentional⁷. At about the same time the coinages of Adraa and Bostra also chose to honor Septimius Severus⁸,

which might relate to privileges that the latter bestowed on Arabia⁹.

The river deity on the coins of Dion

The new coin type depicts a bearded male river deity. The type concurs with the iconography of reclining river deities, and the attributes, overturned amphora, reed and cornucopia, are typical attributes of river deities¹⁰. Also the reed crown is consistent with the dress of river deities, although it occurs more rarely¹¹. The tree opposite the river god serves to elaborate on the setting of the river in an area with abundant vegetation.

It is clear that the iconography of this river god draws on Hellenistic and Roman models depicting rivers as bearded elderly men. Personifications of rivers are well-attested in Graeco-Roman art and celebrate the prosperity that derives from the fertility of the rivers. There is, however, a second type of river deity,

⁶ Augé 1988, 326.

⁷ On the imperial portrait with radiate crown in civic coinage, cf. Lichtenberger 2011, 232–241.

⁸ Adraa: Spijkerman 1978, 62–63 no. 11; Bostra: Kindler 1983, 112–113 no. 25.

⁹ Cf. Bowersock 1983, 112–122.



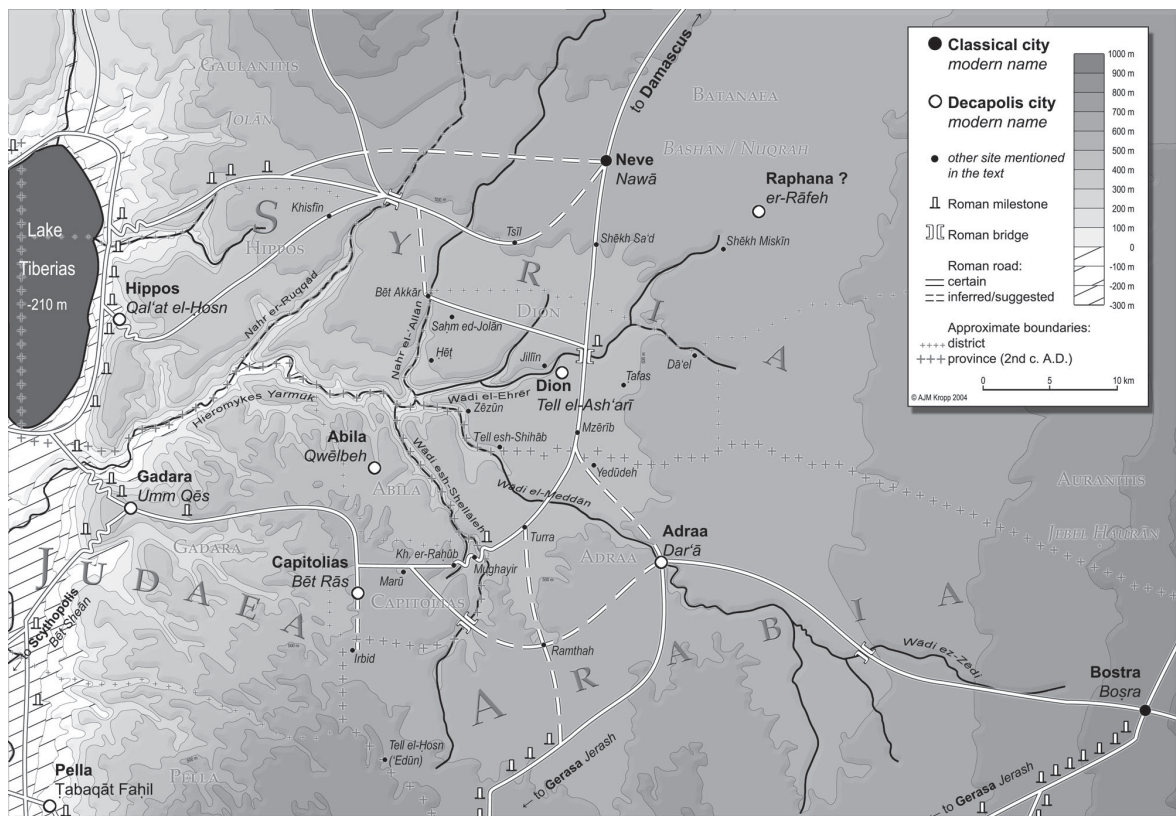


Fig. 11: Map of the river system of the Hieromykes/Yarmuk (Kropp 2006, 127 fig. 2)

which particularly in the Near East is well attested: young crawling river gods that go together with depictions of the civic Tyche. Such a type goes back to the famous Tyche of Antioch¹², and in Dion, the young crawling river god occurs on the coins depicting Tyche. This means that we have at least two types of river deity in the coinage of Dion. Such duplication is not uncommon¹³.

The topography of Dion has been hitherto only little investigated. Generally, the city is located on Tell el-Ashari. This site lies close to the river Hieromykes (Yarmuk¹⁴) and it can therefore be assumed that the river deity depicted is the Hieromykes (**fig. 11**).

The Hieromykes in coinage

Not only is the Hieromykes depicted on coins of Dion, it also occurs on coins of other cities within the Hieromykes river system. Most prominently, it figures on the coins of Adraa that in fact lay on a tributary of the Hieromykes

(Wadi el-Meddān)¹⁵. The coins were minted in the time of Commodus (**fig. 12**), Septimius Severus (**fig. 13**) and Valerianus (**fig. 14**)¹⁶. They depict the reclining figure of a bearded river god with cornucopia and reed, in some cases even with reed crown. The legend names the river explicitly as Hieromykes.¹⁷ The iconography is the same as on the coin of Dion. Opposite the river sits a female on a rock looking to the right to Hieromykes. She is also holding a reed and other objects, among them possibly

¹⁰ Imhoof-Blumer 1923; Weiss 1988; Klementa 1993.

¹¹ Klementa 1993, 215.

¹² Meyer 2006.

¹³ Lichtenberger – Raja 2016, 109–110 n. 24.

¹⁴ On the historic river system of the Yarmuk cf. Ionides – Blake 1939, *passim*.

¹⁵ On Adraa cf. Kettenhofen 1991; Sartre 1992, 151–155; Sartre-Fauriat – Sartre 2016, 21–34.

¹⁶ Spijkerman 1978, 60–65 nos. 6. 11. 15; Kettenhofen 1991.

¹⁷ In the rich epigraphic material from Adraa, the Hieromykes does not occur. Cf. Sartre-Fauriat – Sartre 2016, 18.





Fig. 12: Bronze coin of Adraa, Obv. Commodus, Rev. River god Hieromykes and Styx (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 250, February 23, 2011, lot 283)



Fig. 13: Bronze coin of Adraa, Obv. Septimius Severus and Iulia Domna, Rev. River god Hieromykes and Styx (Frank Sternberg Auktion November 25./26, 1976, lot 501)



Fig. 14: Bronze coin of Adraa, Obv. Valerianus, Rev. River god Hieromykes and Styx (Jerusalem, Israel Museum, no. 2014.17.34980 = Meshorer et al. 2013, pl. 127.14)

an overturned amphora. Usually this figure is identified as civic Tyche¹⁸ but since she lacks a mural crown, this identification is not convincing. Because of the amphora and the reed as well as her semi-nude drapery, she has to be identified as a nymph¹⁹. Amphora and reed suggest that she is a spring nymph and that she relates to a spring close to Adraa.

The Hieromykes also figures on the coins of Gadara, another city of the Decapolis, which according to Pliny is located *Hieromyce prae-fluente* (Plin. n.h. 5.16.74). In this city, the river god appears combined with the Tyche of the city as the youthful crawling god²⁰. Also, in Gadara, several coins depict a galley, which, it has been argued, relates to the river Hieromykes, but this cannot be ascertained²¹.

The waters of Dion

There is no direct testimony for the name of the river on which Dion lies. However, the identical iconography of the river god on the coin of Dion with the identified Hieromykes from the coins of Adraa and the testimony of Pliny relating to Gadara substantiate the identification of the river god on the new coin type of Dion as Hieromykes.

The Hieromykes is a deep gorge with several tributaries (**fig. 11**). It is in this landscape that late antique authors locate the river Styx²². The most important testimony comes from a fragment of Damascius from his »Life of Isidore«. When travelling from Adraa to Dion he writes:

»This water too is said to be Stygian. The area in which it lies is a plain in Arabia stretching from the east as far as the abandoned town of Dia [= Dion]. Then suddenly the earth splits into a deep chasm thickly covered on all sides with rocks and wild plants growing from

¹⁸ Spijkerman 1978, 60–65 nos. 6. 11. 15; Meshorer 1985, 84; Augé 1988, 328; Tardieu 1990, 48; Meshorer et al. 2003, 144–145 nos. 4. 14; Sartre-Fauriat – Sartre 2016, 33.

¹⁹ The late Thomas Fischer, Bochum, was the first to suggest this (cf. Kettenhofen 1991, 79 n. 5) followed by Kettenhofen 1991, 79 and Riedl 2003, 75–77. On the iconography of nymphs and their relation to springs and water, cf. Halm-Tisserant – Siebert 1997.

²⁰ Spijkerman 1978, 138–147 nos. 42–45. 50. 71.

²¹ Lichtenberger 2000/2002. However, see the convincing correction by Gatier 2007, 177–179 who argues against reading Hieromykes in the legend.

²² Cf. Tardieu 1990, 39–69; Lichtenberger 2003, 60–61; Kropp 2006, 129; Ma'oz 2008, 156–159. On further localisations of the Styx in the Mediterranean world cf. Waser 1909–1915, 1572–1574.



the rocks. On the left hand side the descent is narrow and rough (since, as well as being stony, it is thick with wild and irregular vegetation) extending for fifteen stadia. Yet not only men, but also fit women descend this path. At the bottom, in the glen which follows on from it, there are gardens and many farms. At its furthest and narrowest end the crevasse has a reservoir for the waters of Styx which fall down in a circle, are dispersed into the air as a result of dropping from a great height and then collect again below. This spectacle and natural phenomenon is both impressive and terrifying. Noone has ever seen it without being filled with religious awe. Of the offerings which are cast into the water, some sink into the abyss, even if they are light in weight, when the divinity is favorable; otherwise, even if they are heavy, they float and are regurgitated in an extraordinary manner. The local inhabitants know from experience to hold in awe an oath sworn on this place and these waters; this is why they swear by them very seldom. And if anyone ever breaks his oath, they say that he perishes within the year, his body becoming swollen by dropsy; and noone has ever escaped this punishment²³.

In another fragment, Damascius mentions that the water of the Arabian Styx flows in a waterfall²⁴.

Since the water of the Styx is said to be poisonous, it comes as no surprise that Stephanus of Byzantium, without mentioning the Styx by name, says »Sweet is the water of Dion to drink, but drink it and thou lovest thy thirst, and straightaway thy life²⁵.

The notion that water from the Hieromykes is toxic, is also found further downstream in Gadara: Already Strabon (16.2.45) mentions that the waters are lethal and this probably hints at the age-old Styx tradition which goes back to a time long before late antiquity²⁶.

Several suggestions have been made as to the exact locality described by Damascius²⁷. None of them is conclusive and therefore we have to be satisfied with locating the gorge of the Styx somewhere between Adraa and



Fig. 15: Column of Igel, Upper part of eastern side with Thetis and the infant Achilles with reclining Styx (Dragendorff – Krüger 1924, 66 fig. 80)

Dion²⁸. Somewhere in this fluvial landscape the place must be sought and it can be assumed that it was an extra-urban oracular sanctuary²⁹.

Hieromykes and Styx

The river Styx is female; she is one of the daughters of Oceanus. Therefore, it is evident that the bearded reclining river god with reed crown on the coins of Dion and Adraa cannot be identified with the river Styx and that this river god is Hieromykes, as clearly stated in the legend on the coins of Adraa.

But what about the nymph on the coins of Adraa (**fig. 12–14**)? It is obvious that this personification relates to water, and one possible interpretation could be that it refers to one

²³ Damascius, *Vita Isid.* 135B (translation by P. Athanassiadi).

²⁴ Damascius, *Vita Isid.* 135A.

²⁵ Steph. Byz. s. v. Dion.

²⁶ Tardieu 1990, 42 suggests that even the tractate *Mishnah Parah* 8:10, which mentions that the waters of the Hieromykes are ritually impure, relates to the Styx tradition. This remains to be proven but if true would underline the long history of the tradition, since the text goes back to the 2nd/3rd century A.D.

²⁷ See above n. 20.

²⁸ On the situating of the Styx in underground landscapes, cf. Baleriaux 2016.

²⁹ Lichtenberger 2003, 60–61.





Fig. 16: Detail of Tensa Capitolina with Thetis and the infant Achilles accompanied by two semi-nude female figures (DAI-ROM 40.451)

of the smaller watercourses and tributaries of the Hieromykes. This is a minimalist result, but in the following, I argue for an identification of the nymph with Styx: In Graeco-Roman iconography, the personified depiction of Styx is very rare, but if depicted, then she is usually

shown as a nymph³⁰. Most attestations are from the Roman period and the majority relate to the bathing of the infant Achilles in the river Styx³¹. Slightly later than the coins of Adraa is the depiction of Styx as a semi-nude nymph on one of the reliefs of the Column of Igel (**fig. 15**), dating to the mid-3rd century C.E.³². On the late-3rd century C.E. so-called Tensa Capitolina, Thetis is shown bathing Achilles in the Styx, accompanied by two semi-nude reclining nymphs with reed (**fig. 16**)³³. The subject was popular in late antiquity and several monuments show the personification of the Styx in the same position as the nymph on the coin of Adraa. A semi-nude female sitting on a rock with a vessel from which water flows appears on an octagonal silver dish from Kaiseraugst (**fig. 17**) dating to the first half of the 4th century C.E.³⁴. She is holding reed, and a tree accompanies the scene. A second nymph is shown stretching out her right arm. The same kind of figu-

³⁰ Giudice 1994.

³¹ Kossatz-Deissmann 1981, 43–45 nos. 5–18; von Gonzenbach 1984, 235–240; Giudice 1994, 818 nos. 1–5.

³² Dragendorff – Krüger 1924, 66 fig. 80; Kossatz-Deissmann 1981, 43 no. 7; Giudice 1994, 818 no. 1.

³³ von Gonzenbach 1984, 302–303.

³⁴ Kossatz-Deissmann 1981, 43 no. 11; von Gonzenbach 1984, 235–240; Giudice 1994, 818 no. 4.



Fig. 17: Detail of Achilles plate from Kaiseraugst with Thetis and the infant Achilles with two reclining nymphs (one of them Styx) (Augusta Raurica, photograph: Susanne Schenker)





Fig. 18: Detail of table plate in Rome with Thetis and the infant Achilleus accompanied by two semi-nude female figures (DAI ROM 70.37)

re occurs on a late-antique table plate, again together with a tree (**fig. 18**)³⁵. Although these images are later than the coin, the figure types are based on classical types and can serve as a comparison for an identification of such female figures as Styx.

Although the identification of the female figure on the coins of Adraa as Styx is not ascertained by a legend, for now it is the best possible option³⁶. Most coins of Adraa of this type are worn and maybe in the future a better-preserved coin with more detail and recognizable attributes of the female can substantiate this identification. Finally, going back to the new coin type of Dion, the characterization of the setting by a tree might be an allusion to the Styx. Damascius emphasizes the rich vegetation at the Styx, it is furthermore a recurrent feature in the scenery of Styx (**fig. 15–18**), and therefore, the tree on the coin might hint at the Stygian riverscape, although this evidence is also not conclusive since trees are not rare in combination with river deities on coins³⁷. In any case, the new coin type of Dion makes us

rethink the well-known type of Adraa. Clearly it can be dismissed that Tyche, as previously assumed, accompanies Hieromykes on the coins of Adraa. In this paper, I have suggested that the female figure in fact is the personification of Styx and her identification is supported by iconographic comparanda and by the local importance of the river in the two neighboring cities of Dion and Adraa. If this interpretation is correct, then the two cities not only shared the Hieromykes, but also the Stygian tradition creating a remarkable religious riverscape.

³⁵ Kossatz-Deissmann 1981, 43 no. 10; Dresken-Weiland 1991, 92. 346 no. 5; Giudice 1994, 818 no. 2.

³⁶ Riedl 2003, 75–77 interprets the female in a very general way as a nymph that symbolizes water richness.

³⁷ Imhoof-Blumer 1923, *passim*.



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