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by Yoav Farhi

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Contact: Yoav Farhi, PhD, Research Fellow, The Zinman Institute of Archaeology, University of Haifa, e-mail: yoav.farhi@mail.huji.ac.il (GND <http://d-nb.info/gnd/1107443504>)

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Eleutheropolis and Gaza: A Newly Discovered Die Sharing in Roman Palestine

Yoav Farhi

Abstract: This paper presents a new occurrence of die sharing in Roman Palestine, this time between Eleutheropolis and Gaza under Septimius Severus.

Key Words: Roman provincial coinage, Roman Palestine, die sharing, Septimius Severus

Zusammenfassung: Der Artikel präsentiert eine neue Stempelkoppelung aus dem Römischen Palästina, in diesem Fall eine Verbindung zwischen Eleutheropolis und Gaza aus der Zeit des Septimius Severus.

Schlagwörter: Lokalprägung, Römisches Palästina, Stempelkoppelungen, Septimius Severus

During my study of the coinage of Gaza in the Roman period, I have noted that the portraits on the coins of Gaza dated to year 268 (207/8 CE) are very similar to the ones on the coins of Eleutheropolis¹, especially those of years 8 and 9 of the local era (206/7 and 207/8 CE) and suggested that it seems possible that the dies for both cities were cut by the same die cutter/workshop². Further study of the coinage of both cities has revealed that there is more than only similarity among the dies and, in addition to the already published die links between Gaza and Raphia³, I can now point to another instance of die sharing in Roman Palestine, this time between Eleutheropolis and Gaza under Septimius Severus.

It seems that at least four of the obverse dies used for the four known types struck in Gaza in 207/8 CE are known from coins of Eleutheropolis dated to 206/7 and 207/8 CE (Table 1)⁴. The largest denomination in both cities was struck in the name of Septimius Severus (**No. 1**); the second denomination in both cities was struck in the name of young Caracalla (**No. 2**); the smallest denomination in both cities is in the name of Geta. One denomination in his name is known in Eleutheropolis, with a similar type in Gaza (**No. 3**), while another, smaller denomination, is only known in Gaza (**No. 4**), possibly struck by the same die used for the previous denomination but on a smaller

flan, thus producing a smaller denomination. It should be noted that the series in Eleutheropolis dated Year 9 (207/8 CE) also included an obverse die in the name of Julia Domna⁵, which was not used in Gaza.

The fact that at least two obverse dies (**Nos. 1–2** above) are known from dated coins of Eleutheropolis earlier than they are known on the coins of Gaza indicate that dies from Eleutheropolis were brought to Gaza rather than the opposite.

This is especially interesting in the case of Gaza since it was the only city in the region to mint regularly under Septimius Severus already from 193/4 CE and up to 207/8 CE. No new coins were minted in Gaza in the final years under Septimius Severus (208/9–210/1 CE). The fact that Gaza probably did not produce new obverse dies during 207/8 CE but used obverse dies of Eleutheropolis suggests that the local

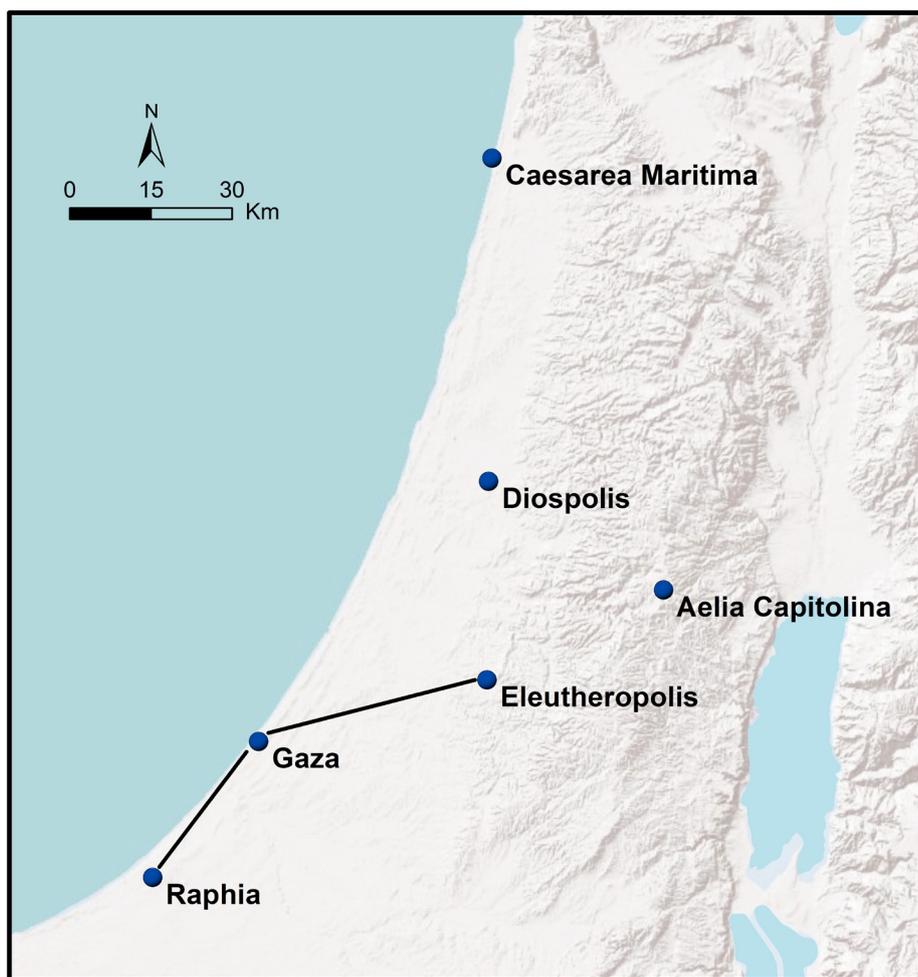
¹ Eleutheropolis is located some 45 km north-east of Gaza, half way between Gaza and Aelia Capitolina (see **Map 1**) (I wish to thank H. Cohen-Klonimus for preparing the map). For the history of the city see TIR 118–119.

² Farhi 2013, 170.

³ Farhi 2007/2008a; Farhi 2015.

⁴ The obverse die with the specific portrait of Septimius Severus (**No. 1**) is already known in Eleutheropolis in 201/2 CE (CHL 110, Nos. 2–4).

⁵ CHL 110, No. 11.



Map 1: Orientation map (© H. Cohen-Klonimus)

mint already had some difficulties during this year. However, it should be noted that Gaza did produce the reverse dies for the types struck during this year. This fact proves that at least in some cases the obverse and reverse dies were definitely cut by different die cutters and probably by different workshops.

The difficulties of the local mint seem to continue during the final years of Septimius Severus and into the reign of Caracalla as evidenced by the fact that from 208/9 to 213/4 CE Gaza did not produce any new dies and did not strike new coins at all but used dated countermarks which were punched on earlier coins of the city instead. In addition, one bronze specimen only (in the name of Julia Domna) is known under Caracalla in 214/5 CE and no coins of the city are known for 215/6 CE.

Thus, it seems that during 207/8 CE Gaza used obverse dies of another city (Eleutheropolis) together with reverse dies which had probably been produced in Gaza itself; after this year and during the rest of the period under Septimius Severus and Caracalla (up to 214/5 CE), no obverse or reverse dies were used and no coins were struck in Gaza at all (above). This seems to indicate some kind of deterioration in the local coin production. It also indicates that the die cutter who worked for Eleutheropolis did not move to Gaza in 207/8 CE and cut the dies there. Additional evidence for the deterioration in the local coin production in Gaza during 207/8 CE compared to Eleutheropolis is the evidence that the coins of Gaza which were struck in 207/8 CE seem to be less common than those struck by Eleutheropolis using



No.	Eleutheropolis (206/7–207/8 CE)	Gaza (207/8 CE)
1	 <p>CHL 110, No. 5 (12.41 g; 27 mm) Dated >year 8< = 206/7 CE</p>	 <p>Jeselsohn coll. (Farhi 2013, 236*, Type 249b.2) (13.96 g; 28 x 28.5 mm)</p>
Obv. Laureate, draped and cuirassed bust of Septimius Severus r., Α Κ Λ Σ Ε Π Σ Ε - Ο Ε Υ Π Ε Ρ Σ Ε Β (27 mm)		
2	 <p>Stack's Coin Galleries December 2006 Auction (13.12.2006), Lot 98 (23 mm) Dated >year 8< = 206/7 CE</p>  <p>CHL 110, No. 16 (7.82 g; 23 x 24 mm) Dated >year 9< = 207/8 CE</p>	 <p>Yashin 2007, 95, No. 460; Farhi 2013, 237*, Type 250.a.1a (10.33 g; 24 x 25 mm)</p>
Obv. Laureate, draped and cuirassed bust of young Caracalla r., Α Β Κ Μ Α Β - - Α Ν Τ Ω Σ Ε (24mm)		
3	 <p>CHL 110, No. 23 (2.51 g; 15 x 15.5 mm) Undated</p>	 <p>CHL 122, No. 189; Farhi 2013, 238*, Type 251.a.1 (4.49 g; 17.5 x 18 mm)</p>
4		 <p>Yashin 2007, 95, No. 461; Farhi 2013, 238*, Type 252a.1b (1.23 g; 12 x 13 mm)</p>
Obv. Draped and cuirassed bust of Geta r., bareheaded; Π Σ Ε Π - - Γ Ε Τ Α Κ (15 mm)		

Table 1: Die links between Eleutheropolis and Gaza under Septimius Severus



the same dies (I know of 16 such coins of Gaza and 49 of Eleutheropolis)⁶.

The fact that Gaza, the oldest, largest and most important city in southern Roman Palestine, used dies of a new and smaller city which had no minting activity before the period of Septimius Severus, is surprising and might point to a real difficulty that Gaza had during 207/8 CE as well as to the rising (economic?) power of Eleutheropolis under Severus, who made it a polis c. 200 CE⁷. However, 207/8 CE was also the last year under Severus in which coins were struck in Eleutheropolis, so the fact that both Gaza and Eleutheropolis did not strike coins during the final years of Severus (208/9–210/1 CE) might suggest regional issues which caused some difficulties for these cities and others as well⁸.

The phenomenon of die sharing between cities is known from other regions as well, such as, Asia Minor, the Peloponnesus, Syria and Arabia, in the late second and third centuries CE. In his work on the coinage of Asia Minor, Konrad Kraft demonstrated by means of die links that central cities/mints produced coins for smaller cities⁹. The same practice was attested by Kevin Butcher, who proved that Syrian Antioch produced coins for numerous cities in northern Syria and for Philippopolis in Arabia in 218–253 CE (Butcher 1986–1987:73–84, Pls. 24–29; 1988:63–75). Susanne Grunauer-von Hoerschelmann found stylistic peculiarities of obverse dies of Corinth from the Severan period that are also found on obverses of coins from some Peloponnesian towns. She assumed that direct models from Corinth were copied in multiple towns, and suggested two possible reasons for this: Either a single workshop in Corinth provided all the dies for the surrounding cities or a travelling Corinthian workshop, equipped with model coins of the Severan family, traveled across the Peloponnesus and coined wherever they received orders and bronze bullion¹⁰. George Watson has recently published a new corpus of shared dies of Roman provincial coinage in which he also mentioned the existence of die sharing

amongst cities of Arabia and the Decapolis during the reign of Elagabalus¹¹.

We have no certain answer to the question of what might be the reasons and the motivation for the die sharing between Eleutheropolis and Gaza. Maybe there was a need for a special permission to cut and use obverse dies and for some reason Gaza had problems in getting this permission during the years under discussion. Or perhaps the cutting of new obverse dies was rather expensive and the city (or someone on behalf of the local boule?) was trying to save money for the city or for himself. Another option is that there was, for some reason, lack of skilled die cutters to perform this job.

Regarding the vast phenomenon in Asia Minor, it was recently suggested that the explosion in use of shared dies during the third-century CE might be better explained by connections between cities that were conducive to the spread of ideas than by any inherent benefit arising from the practice itself¹².

Besides the die sharing discussed here, we know almost nothing about possible connec-

⁶ It should be noted that generally speaking, the coins of Gaza are much more common in public and private collections than those of Eleutheropolis. However, coins of Eleutheropolis which are dated to the years under discussion are more common than those of Gaza of the same year.

⁷ Eleutheropolis became a polis, alongside Diospolis, by Septimius Severus during his visit to the region in c. 199/200 CE (Farhi 2007/2008b, 141, 163; Kushnir-Stein 2000, 154). The first coins to be struck in Eleutheropolis were under Septimius Severus, from 201/2 CE (year 3) to 207/8 (year 9) and the last ones under Elagabalus in 217/8 CE (year 19). For the coins of Eleutheropolis see Spijkerman 1972; CHL 109–111; Sandberg 2014 (the most recent paper dealing with this city, unfortunately lacking a thorough study and a catalogue of the coinage).

⁸ Diospolis was the only city west of the Jordan River to strike coins during this period, and in one year only (208/9 CE); see Farhi 2013, 203–204, Table 22. Diospolis is located some 37 km north of Eleutheropolis (see **Map 1**).

⁹ Kraft 1972. See also Johnston 1982/1983.

¹⁰ Grunauer-von Hoerschelmann 1982/1983.

¹¹ Watson 2020, 261.

¹² Watson 2021. See also Watson 2019 (*non vidi*).



tions between Gaza and Eleutheropolis, except for the fact that they shared a border¹³.

Due to the very small number of cases of die sharing in Roman Palestine, all within a relatively short period, the possibility that the reason for the die sharing was a result of a trend rather than a practical issue seems to me less relevant for this region and other, probably practical, options might be involved.

Closing remarks

The reason for the die sharing between Eleutheropolis and Gaza (as well as between Gaza and Raphia) is yet unknown. The motivation for it was probably practical. In any case it seems that the minting of provincial coins in Asia Minor, the Peloponnesus, Syria, Arabia, the Decapolis and southern Roman Palestine involved some similar patterns of activities from the last quarter of the second century CE into the first quarter of the third century CE.

Such studies, and especially those dealing with obverse portraits and types, might reveal connections and relations between neighboring mints such as shown here. Moreover, it becomes clear that die studies of bronze coins, a less developed branch of numismatic endeavor, can significantly contribute to diverse subjects such as the output of the mints and other purely economic aspects. I hope that this and other studies into die links and other numismatic connections between the mints in southern Roman Palestine will lead to the identification of more die links in other parts of this region as well.

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