



Orodes III, AE drachm [van't Haaff 16.2.1-2A variant (no dot in crescent)].
From the collection of Robert L3/Bob L.

An Introduction to Collecting Coins from Elymais **By Robert L3 (Bob L)**

The coinage of the many ancient cultures beyond the Greco-Roman world is often underappreciated. Some such series seem particularly mysterious due to a dearth of extant, reliable ancient writings about the societies which produced the coins. In some cases the mystery is compounded by the quirkiness of the coins themselves: arcane iconography, an occasional lack of dates and personal names on some issues, standardization of rulers' depictions over time, progressively garbled legends and degenerated images, poor minting practices, relatively low minting output for particular issues, and cessation of domestic coin production for extended periods due to dynamic political climates.

It is fair to say that for many people the coins of Elymais represent a challenging and enigmatic collecting area, one fraught with occasional attribution difficulties, as well as frustrations resulting from the relative scantiness and fluidity of published research that deals with the subject. However, for collectors who enjoy coinage from "off the beaten path," and who are willing to endure the types of challenges just mentioned, Elymaean coins can be exceedingly rewarding and fun to collect.

Some Historical Background

Elymais' history – particularly its early political history – is a bit murky, especially as compared to ancient Western states. In the "History and Coinage of Elymais During 150/149 – 122/121 BC," Dr. G.R.F. Assar bemoans the lack of "credible statements on Elymais in the Greco-Latin literary sources. It appears that the classical authors were either heedless of the Elymaean affairs or found very little or no useful information in this regard among the earlier records to report."

Elymais' prehistory stretches back to the 3rd millennium BC, when it was Elam of the Hebrew Bible. The Elamites of the Old Testament were the descendants of Elam, son of Shem and grandson of Noah. By around the 6th century BC Elam was a vassal state of the Achaemenid Persians. In the 4th century BC Alexander defeated the Persians and took control of the region. After Alexander's death, the Seleucid

Kingdom dominated the region. The Elymaeans are not mentioned in any ancient texts for about a century after Alexander's conquest of the area. According to Strabo, around 220 BC Elymaean troops aided the acting Seleucid satrap of Media in a revolt against Antiochus III and in an attempted invasion of Babylonia. Three decades later, around 190 BC, Elymaean archers aided Antiochus III for an abortive invasion of Greece. According to www.iranicaonline.org, the Greek historian Appian of Alexandria "described these Elymaean archers as riding on swift camels and shooting arrows with dexterity from their high mounts." This is reminiscent of the Parthians' proficiency with the bow while riding horses.

Like Characene and Persis, Elymais became a semiautonomous vassal kingdom under the Parthians. (Parthia first conquered Elymais around 140 BC, during the reign of the Parthian king Mithradates I) It was located in the region of Susiana, at the north end of the Persian Gulf, in the southwestern part of what is now Iran. (See map) Babylonia and Characene lay to the west and southwest, Persis to the southeast. Initially the capital of Elymais was Susa, exclusively, but later may have vacillated between Susa and Seleucia on the Hedyphon. These two cities also served as the primary (perhaps exclusive) mints of Elymais. The kingdom, which was initially ruled by members of the Kamnaskires dynasty and later by members of an Arsacid dynasty (believed to be relatives of the ruling line in Parthia), lasted from the mid-2nd century BC to the early 3rd century AD, when it was defeated (along with the Parthians) by the Sassanid invasion led by Ardashir I around 228 AD.



A map of ancient Iran, with the red circle indicating the region of Elymais, at the north end of the Persian Gulf.

The western portion of Elymais was flat while the eastern portion consisted of the highlands of the Zagros Mountains. Immigrants from Greek states were attracted to the Western region since, as P.A. van't Haaff points out, there were "opportunities for agriculture, industry, and trade." These immigrants influenced early Elymaean culture, art, politics, and language. In the eastern highlands, there was little if any Greek influence in art and language. Local languages, of which nothing is now known, prevailed.

The Coinage

Most information about Elymaean coinage is available only in bits and pieces from Web sources, old articles in long out-of-print periodicals, and passages in books devoted to the coinage of multiple cultures. Information and chronologies have been updated repeatedly over time, thus creating some frustrations for collectors trying to attribute their coins. Howard Cole's Numiswiki entry contrasts the most recent research regarding the chronology of Elymaean rulers (by van't Haaff, as somewhat influenced by the work of Russian numismatist R.E Vardanian) with Jacques de Morgan's 1930 proposal for the sequence:

<http://www.forumancientcoins.com/numiswiki/view.asp?key=Elymaean%20Chronology>

Over the years, numismatists and collectors primarily used de Morgan's 1930 study ("Numismatic de la Perse antique"), which was published in Part III of "Traite des Monnaies Grecques et Romaines." De Morgan's work was translated and republished in 1976 by Attic Books as Ancient Persian Numismatics: Elymais. Among other studies that have been published since de Morgan's early research are several articles from the 1960s by Georges Le Rider; Michael Mitchiner's 1978 book Oriental Coins and Their Values, which includes a section on Elymais; David R. Sear's 1982 Greek Imperial Coins and their Values, which also devotes a section to Elymais; Michael Alram's 1986 Iranisches Personennamenbuch: Nomina Propria Iranica In Nummis, with a chapter focusing on Elymaean coinage; an article by Ed Dobbins that appeared in "The Celator" in August 1992, exploring bronze drachms from the Elymais Arsacid Dynasty; an article by Robert C. Senior ("Notes on a Few Ancient Coins") from the "Oriental Numismatic Society Newsletter," 155, Winter 1998; and an article by Dr. G.R.F. Assar, covering early Elymaean coinage, in "The International Journal of Ancient Iranian Studies," Autumn and Winter edition 2004 – 2005.

In 2007 the Classical Numismatic Group published the Catalogue of Elymaean Coinage by P.A. van't Haaff, which has by now largely gained acceptance as the primary reference for these coins. A note to collectors who plan to use this important reference book: navigating the catalog can present challenges since the visual clues that differentiate coins within some of van't Haaff's subtypes are so subtle as to be nearly indistinguishable.

Van't Haaff divides the history of Elymaean coinage into three distinct periods: the Early Kamnaskirid Dynasty, the Later Kamnaskirid Dynasty, and the Elymais Arsacid Dynasty. This division, which makes sense in terms of what we know of Elymaean political history, also works well for organizing coins in the series. The political changes over the course of the kingdom are paralleled by stylistic changes in the coinage. Echoing concurrent changes in Parthian coinage, the Hellenistic naturalism of early Elymaean issues gives way over time to quaint simplification and stylization.

The Early Kamnaskirid Dynasty

Van't Haaff dates the **Early Kamnaskirid Dynasty** as c. 148/7 – c. 127 BC, starting with the reign of the first Kamnaskires (Kamnaskires I Megas Soter) who, at least for a time, wrested control of Elymais from the Seleucids. This was a politically dynamic period in Elymaean history with challenges coming from both the Seleucids and Parthians, as well as from usurpers of uncertain origins. According to van't Haaff,

rulers during this time consisted of Kamnaskires I Megas Soter, Kamnaskires II Nikephorus, Okkonapses (a usurper), Phraates II (of Parthia, serving as viceroy after the Arsacids took control of the area), Tigraios (usurper), and Dareios (usurper).

Coinage of the Early Kamnaskirid Dynasty consists of tetradrachms and drachms of good silver content and fine Greek style, and smaller AE units of lesser artistic quality. Coins from this period are very rare and valuable. Unlike contemporaneous Parthian tetradrachms, there are no dates on Elymaean coins at this time. Monograms of uncertain symbolism appear frequently on silver issues as well as on the reverses of some of Kamnaskires II's bronze units.

In keeping with their Seleucid archetypes, all of the silver issues of the Early Kamnaskirid Dynasty display a naturalistically modeled, right-facing, diademed bust of the ruler on the obverse. Reverses iconographically echo Seleucid AR's, with most displaying a youthful god (Belos or Zeus) seated left on an omphalos, holding an arrow in his outstretched right hand and a bow in his left hand (similar to the seated Apollo reverses of Seleucid issues of the third and second centuries BC).

The Elymaeans were apparently precluded from minting their own coinage for about a half century following this initial run of rulers. From 127 – c. 80 BC no domestic coinage was minted and Parthian coinage was used instead.



Kamnaskires II Nikephorus, AR tetradrachm [van't Haaff 2.1.1-8.a (this coin)].

Although some scholars believe that Kamnaskires I Megas Soter and Kamnaskires II Nikephorus were the same individual, van't Haaff joins Le Rider and Alram in believing that Nikephorus was the second ruler of Elymais and possibly the son of Megas Soter.

Image courtesy of CNG, www.cngcoins.com; this coin currently in the collection of Howard Cole.

The Later Kamnaskirid Dynasty

Around 82/1 BC Elymais apparently regained some of its previous political autonomy and began minting its own coins again. Van't Haaff dates the **Later Kamnaskirid Dynasty** as c. 82/1 – 33/2 BC, the period covered by the reigns of Kamnaskires III and his queen Anzaze, Kamnaskires IV, and Kamnaskires V. Coin denominations during these years consist of silver and billon tetradrachms, drachms, hemidrachms, obols, and hemiobols. A greater variety of monograms (as compared to earlier Elymaean issues)

appears at this time, on coins of all three reigns. Dates (years), typically based on the Seleucid era and calculated from the numerical equivalents of Greek letters, often appear on coins of all denominations during this period – although, unfortunately, they commonly missed their flans during strikes.

The well-known Elymaean anchor motif, perhaps inspired by anchors' appearances as a dynastic insignia on a number of Seleucid coins, begins to be seen more regularly. In its initial presentation, on an issue of Kamnaskires II Nikephorus during the years of the Early Kamnaskirid Dynasty, the Elymaean anchor may have been intended as a symbol of the mint at Seleucia on the Hedyphon (whereas a horse head was used on coins of the Susa mint). However, its later proliferation suggests that it evolved into a general symbol of the kingdom (not unlike the Ekbatana monogram on Parthian drachms, which transitioned over time from a specific mintmark to a general symbol of Parthia). In its early appearances on Elymaean coinage, the anchor looks like a match for the anchor often seen on certain earlier Seleucid coins. Its shape would later evolve.

Interestingly, during the reign of Kamnaskires III and Anzaze, an anchor that may have alluded to the Elymaean symbol appeared on some drachms issued by the Parthian king Sinatruces (77 – 70 BC). As Fred B. Shore notes in Parthian Coins and History: Ten Dragons Against Rome, “We know of a successful (Parthian) war with Elymais in 77 BC...Since the Elymaeans used the anchor symbol, the Parthian coins with the anchor were most likely commemorative of this victory.”



Obverse of a drachm of the Parthian king Sinatruces, 77 – 70 BC (Sellwood 34.3), showing an anchor believed to commemorate a Parthian victory over Elymais during the period of the Later Kamnaskirid Dynasty. Image courtesy of CNG, www.cngcoins.com; this coin currently in the collection of Schatz.

Some debasement of silver issues is noted during the Later Kamnaskirid Dynasty. Also to be noted is the change to left-facing obverse portraits that are slightly less naturalistic than the depictions on earlier coinage, and that exhibit “Persian style hair dress (and) prominent beards.” (van’t Haaff) The beginning of the movement away from Greek verisimilitude is underway. In addition, by the time of Kamnaskires

V coins no longer show the seated god of the Seleucid-inspired antecedents, but rather the portrait of a bearded individual, perhaps the Elymaean sky god Belos.

Coins from the Later Kamnaskirid Dynasty are rare and tend to prompt some competitive bidding at auction. Generally speaking, however, they are nowhere near as rare as coins from the Early Kamnaskirid Dynasty. Furthermore, since around 2012 the number of Later Kamnaskirid Dynasty tetradrachms on the ancient coin market (listed for sale or up for auction) has noticeably increased – particularly tets from the reign of Kamnaskires III and Anzaze. Although this author is unaware of any documentation regarding a recent discovery of a horde or hordes that may account for the uptick, one may safely infer that the more frequent appearance of these coins is related to such finds.



Kamnaskires IV, AR tetradrachm (van't Haaff 8.1.1B).
From the collection of Robert L3/Bob L.



Kamnaskires V, AR tetradrachm (van't Haaff 9.1.1-7).
From the collection of Robert L3/Bob L.

The Elymais Arsacid Dynasty

Around 25 BC an Arsacid (Parthian) line began to rule Elymais and, accordingly, we begin to recognize Parthian names of some kings and to see the appearance of Parthian-type tiaras on the portraits of several of these rulers (e.g. the Orodes III coin at top, above this article's title). We also note diadems sectioning off prominent hair flourishes in the portraits of rulers on some coins, not unlike the tripartite hairstyles rendered on Parthian coins of Vologases V and Osroes I:



Tripartite hairstyles of Parthian kings Vologases V and Osroes I (top row) and kings of the Elymais Arsacid Dynasty: Orodes IV (van't Haaff 17.2.1-1), Kamnaskires-Orodes (van't Haaff 12.3.1-2A2), and Orodes IV [van't Haaff 17.1-1-2a (this coin)] (bottom row).

Bottom left and bottom center coins courtesy of CNG, www.cngcoins.com.

All others from the collection of Robert L3/Bob L.

Van't Haaff dates the **Elymais Arsacid Dynasty** from circa 25 BC through to the fall of Elymais to the Sassanians, c. 228 AD. Years are not written on coins of this period, and only some issues display kings' names. The initial run of coinage of this dynasty, which intensifies the stylistic transition (begun in the Later Kamnaskires Dynasty) to the more abstract obverse imagery and degenerated reverses of the later coinage, consists of an unknown number of unnamed kings that van't Haaff collectively refers to as the "Uncertain Early Arsacid Kings" (late first century BC – early 2nd century AD). De Morgan had given coins in this group the designations of Kamnaskires C and D.



Uncertain Early Arsacid Kings: AE drachm (van't Haaff 10.3.2-1a variant, top) and AE tetradrachm (van't Haaff 10.4.1-1a, bottom). From the collection of Robert L3/Bob L.

No doubt collectors of coins from other areas, particularly of Roman coins, may have a hard time adjusting to the lack of specific assigned dates to the reigns of kings of the Elymais Arsacid Dynasty. Broad date ranges spanning half century periods are provided for kings and their coins. For example, coins of Orodes I are dated late first to early second centuries AD, those of Phraates as early to mid-second century AD, etc.

Denominations of the Elymais Arsacid Dynasty consist almost exclusively of AE tetradrachms and drachms, although the final few rulers of the kingdom issued some smaller unspecified AE units. Coins of pure silver are entirely absent during this dynasty. Some have speculated that by this time the Parthians may have taken Elymaean precious metal reserves for their own use. Still, despite van't Haaff's assertion that at this time "...the metal for all denominations is bronze...there are no longer any...billon coins," some such coins do exist, although they are rare:



Uncertain Early Arsacid Kings, BI tetradrachm (van't Haaff 10.3.1-1A).
From the collection of Robert L3/Bob L.

The Elymaean anchor is now elongated and appears on most obverses, and some reverses, of coins from this period. One of the distinguishing devices that van't Haaff uses to differentiate between coins of the Elymais Arsacid Dynasty (for cataloging purposes) is the number of crossbars on coins' anchors. Although unproven, there may have been some significance to the different number of crossbars. Some researchers have suggested that each number may be associated with a specific mint (one for Susa, two for Seleucia on the Hedyphon, three for a third, unidentified mint). Similarly, some numismatists have associated Greek legends, which appear on some coins, with the Susa mint, and Aramaic legends, which begin to appear during this period, with Seleucia on the Hedyphon. All of this, of course, may be considered speculative.

Anchors had been paired with star symbols toward the end of the Later Kamnaskirid Dynasty. Now, during the Elymais Arsacid Dynasty, we see various combinations of crescents, stars, and pellets accompanying the anchors. These are probably religious symbols although, as van't Haaff points out, "their (specific) attribution is a complicated issue" since Elymaean religious thought was syncretic, influenced by Greek, Roman, Semitic, and Zoroastrian sources.

Just as the iconic Elymaean anchor motif is typically associated with the coinage of this third and final period of the kingdom, so too are the patterns – whether regular or irregular – of dashes that constitute the reverses of many of the drachms and some tetradrachms. Several Elymaean specialists, including de Morgan and Dobbins, have convincingly suggested that the dashes are not the residue of progressively degenerated imagery but, rather, represent intentional – and perhaps symbolic - design motifs. The more orderly patterns have been associated with corn kernels, laurel wreaths, and palm leaves. Regarding the dashes, Dobbins also posits (in his 1992 article in "The Celator") this somewhat ambiguous theory, left unclarified: "One possibility is that the uniqueness of a design recognizable by touch served a beneficial purpose for commerce in the area." This could be taken to mean that in quick transactions, with speedy exchanges of coinage, the coins' feel could perhaps have reinforced individuals' confidence that the correct units were being used. The feel would also assist someone with poor eyesight during such exchanges.



Reverses consisting of rows of dashes, as seen on a drachm of Kamnaskires-Orodes (van't Haaff 12.3.1-2A2e) and tetradrachms of Orodes II (van't Haaff 13.3.1-2A) and Orodes III (van't Haaff 16.4.1-1).
From the collection of Robert L3/Bob L.

Coins from this period – particularly the small AE drachms minted during the second century AD between the reigns of Kamnaskires-Orodes and Orodes III – are the most abundant of extant Elymaean types. As such these coins are fairly easy to collect and are relatively cheap – although better quality specimens tend to demand a premium.



Orodes II, early to mid 2nd century AD (van't Haaff 13.3.2-1A).
From the collection of Robert L3/Bob L.

A Few Cautionary Words about Collecting Elymaeans

Although the great majority of Elymaean coins listed for sale are genuine, cast fakes do exist (this author has spotted several) and struck fakes may also exist. In addition, one may sometimes encounter genuine coins with surfaces altered by tooling or applied sand patinas.

Deposits/encrustations, verdigris, and occasional spots of bronze disease are common on bronze issues, particularly those from the Elymais Arcasid Dynasty. Careful inspection of coins prior to purchase is prudent. Collectors should consider whether – and to what extent – cleaning and other conservation measures are warranted. Often collectors will simply leave minor, inert deposits alone.

Potential buyers should research types and their associated price ranges. While one may expect to see steep prices attached to coins from the Early and Later Kamnaskirid Dynasties, some sellers, particularly on Ebay, have listed relatively common coins from the Elymais Arsacid Dynasty at ridiculously inflated prices. Clearly they are targeting folks who have not done their homework. It is always recommended to buy from trusted sellers.

Web Resources

<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/elymais>

A history of Elymais.

<http://www.forumancientcoins.com/dougsmith/feac46ely.html>

Doug Smith's page devoted to Elymaean coinage.

<http://www.forumancientcoins.com/numiswiki/view.asp?key=Elymaean%20Chronology>

Two proposed chronologies of Elymaean rulers, as posited by de Morgan (1930) and van't Haaff (2007).

<http://parthian-empire.com/articles/History-and-Coinage-of-Elymais.pdf>

"History and Coinage of Elymais During 150/149 – 122/121 BC" by Dr. G.R.F. Assar, from "The International Journal of Ancient Iranian Studies," vol. 4, #2, Autumn/Winter 2004 – 2005.

http://parthia.com/parthia_coins_elymais.htm

A gallery of Elymaean coins. Note: Alram, Mitchiner, de Morgan, and Sear are used for attributions here, as opposed to the more recent research of van't Haaff.

<http://grifterrec.rasmir.com/elymais/elymais.html>

The Elymais page from Tom Mallon's "The Coins and History of Asia."

<http://www.forumancientcoins.com/gallery/index.php?cat=11997>

Howard Cole's gallery of Elymaean coins.

<http://www.forumancientcoins.com/gallery/thumbnails.php?album=3637>

Robert L3's (Bob L's) collection of Elymaean coins.

Primary Sources Used for this Article:

<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/elymais>

Catalogue of Elymaean Coinage by P.A. van't Haaff