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The Dating of the Civic Coins of Artaxata

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PLATE 2

THIS article deals with the dating of the civic bronzes of Artaxata, capital of ancient Armenia. Dates proposed in the past range from the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD. This study proposes that the coins were issued between 34 and 31/30 BC, when there was a gap in the rule of the Artaxiad dynasty of Armenia (189 BC - AD 6).

The civic issues of Artaxata can be divided into three groups on the basis of the numbers I, AI and IB on their reverses:

- 1a. Obverse: turreted head of Tyche right (*RPC* Suppl. 2-I-3844A).
Reverse: Nike advancing left holding wreath and palm; ΑΡΤΑΞΙΚΑΤΩΝ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΕΩC; in l. field, I; in r. field, ΖΞ.
Weight range: 4.35 - 5.77g. (5 specimens)¹ (**Pl. 2, 1**).
- 1b. Obverse: turreted head of Tyche right (Vardanyan 2007, Plate 2, Ab).
Reverse: corn ear; ΑΡΤΑΞΙΚΑΤΩΝ; in l. field, I; in r. field, ΖΞ.
Weight: 3.58g. (1 specimen) (**Pl. 2, 2**).
- 2a. Obverse: turreted head of Tyche right (*RPC* Suppl. 2-I-3844B).
Reverse: laurel wreath; in l. field, AI; in r. field, monogram ΓΙ.
Weight range: 8.95 - 14.98g. (8 specimens) (**Pl. 2, 3**).
- 2b. Obverse: bust of Nike right (*RPC* Suppl. 2-I-3844C).
Reverse: palm branch; in l. field, AI over monogram ΠΛ²; in r. field, monogram ΓΙ.
Weight range: 5.62 - 7.77g. (11 specimens) (**Pl. 2, 4**).
- 3a. Obverse: turreted head of Tyche right (*RPC* Suppl. 2-I-3844D).
Reverse: Nike advancing left holding wreath and palm; ΑΡΤΑΞΙΚΑΤΩΝ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΕΩC; in l. field, IB; in r. field, ΘΞ and monogram ΠΛ.
Weight: 14.62g. (1 specimen) (**Pl. 2, 5**).
- 3b. Obverse: turreted head of Tyche right (*RPC* Suppl. 2-I-3844E).
Reverse: corn ear; ΑΡΤΑΞΙΚΑΤΩΝ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΕΩC; in l. field, IB; in r. field, ΘΞ and monogram ΠΛ.
Weights: 7.09; 7.45g. (2 specimens) (**Pl. 2, 6**).

¹ Metrological data obtained from auction catalogues, *RPC* Suppl. II, and R. Vardanyan, 'Regarding civic bronzes struck in Armenia in AD 1-4', *Armenian Numismatic Journal* 3.2 (2007), pp. 69-77.

² On some specimens this monogram is absent.

From the few specimens known so far, it seems that the civic coins of Artaxata were minted in two denominations as attested by their flan sizes, weights and types. However, it is apparent that the coins of group 1 are of a smaller module than those of groups 2 and 3. It should also be noted that groups 1 and 3 are stylistically similar, whereas group 2 is noticeably different. This difference may be explained by changes in the die engravers or moneyers in charge of issuing these civic coins (see discussion below for the different monograms used on the coins).

Historical Background

The Artaxiad Dynasty was founded by Artaxias, the *Strategos* of Armenia under the Seleucids.³ When Antiochus the Great was defeated by the Romans in the battle of Magnesia in 190 BC, Artaxias (I) seized the opportunity to declare himself independent.⁴ He founded Artaxata as his capital city on the Araxes River and expanded his territories on all sides.⁵ The succession of the following Artaxiad kings is not clear, but it is believed that Artaxias was succeeded by his son Artavasdes I (160-123 BC), who in turn was succeeded by his brother Tigranes I (123-96 BC).⁶

The Artaxiad Dynasty reached its climax during the reign of Tigranes II the Great (95 - 56 BC), who expanded Armenia's boundaries by acquiring territories in eastern Asia Minor, Syria, Mesopotamia and Phoenicia.⁷ He acquired the title 'King of Kings'⁸ and ruled over Antioch, capital of the Seleucid Empire, from 83 to 69 BC.⁹ However, after Pompey the Great's successful campaigns in the east, Tigranes II, weakened by external and internal conflicts, had no choice but to submit to the Roman general and accept his terms of surrender in 66 BC.¹⁰ As a result, he relinquished his newly acquired territories, but remained king of Armenia.

Tigranes the Great was succeeded by his son Artavasdes II (56-34 BC).¹¹ During the ensuing years, Armenia was caught in the struggle between Rome and Parthia. Artavasdes sided with Crassus in the battle against the Parthian king Orodes II (57-38 BC), which ended in Crassus' defeat at Carrhae in 53 BC.¹² In 37 BC, Artavasdes had to ally with Mark Antony and aid him in the invasion of Parthia through Armenia. Although Antony had made several gains during his battles with the Parthians, his advances were ineffectual. In 34 BC Antony called the retreat, blaming the Armenians

³ Strabo *Geography* 11.14.5.

⁴ Polybius *Histories* 25.2.

⁵ Strabo *Geography* 11.14.5-6.

⁶ A detailed study of the history of the Artaxiad period is written in Armenian by H. Manandian, *A Critical Survey of the History of the Armenian People* (Yerevan, 1944), vol. 1. For a history of this period in English, see D.M. Lang, *Armenia, Cradle of Civilization*, 3rd ed. (London, 1980). The succession dates in this paper are based on Manandian's work.

⁷ Strabo *Geography* 11.14.15.

⁸ Appian *Syrian wars* 48. The title is believed to have been taken after the conquests of Parthian territories in 85 BC.

⁹ Justin *Epitome* 40.1.

¹⁰ Plutarch *Pompey* 33; Dio Cassius *Roman history* 36.52.

¹¹ Dio Cassius *Roman history* 40.16.2.

¹² Plutarch *Crassus* 19 and 22.

for his defeat, and the Roman forces were redirected against Armenia.¹³ Artavasdes II was tricked into coming to Antony's camp, where he was kidnapped and held for ransom. The Armenian nobility refused to pay and took to arms by appointing Artavasdes' eldest son, Artaxias II, as king of Armenia in 34 BC. At first Artaxias II fought the Romans, but was soon defeated and escaped to Parthia. After occupying and looting Armenia, Antony returned to Egypt where he paraded Artavasdes and his family in the triumph. Alexander, the 6 year old son of Antony and Cleopatra, was appointed the nominal king of Armenia (34-30 BC), although he most probably never directly ruled there. After Antony's defeat at Actium in 31 BC, Artaxias II established himself on the Armenian throne and ruled from 30 to 20 BC.¹⁴

Armenia's history during the following two and a half decades was full of internal strife and external pressures. Six kings, mostly Roman appointees, occupied the Armenian throne: Tigranes III (20-8 BC), Tigranes IV (1st reign 8-5 BC; 2nd reign 2 BC - AD 1), Artavasdes III (5-2 BC), Ariobarzanes (AD 2-4), Artavasdes IV (AD 4-6),¹⁵ and finally Tigranes V, the last king of the Artaxiad dynasty, who had a brief reign in AD 6.

Survey of Previous Publications

Babelon, the first scholar to discuss the civic coins of Artaxata, places them in the late 2nd century AD.¹⁶ He argues that when in AD 114 Trajan declared Armenia a province, a local era was initiated in Artaxata. He describes a coin belonging to group 3a and considers the field mark ΘΞ as signifying the year 69 of this era and IB as the twelfth month. Hence he places these issues in AD 183 (69 + 114), during the reign of Commodus. Of the Armenian numismatists, Basmadjian and Bedoukian, following Babelon, also attribute these coins to the reign of Commodus.¹⁷ Mousheghian, in his treatise on monetary circulation in ancient Armenia,¹⁸ discusses a coin belonging to group 1a and supports Babelon's attribution, giving the coin to the 10th month of AD 181, also in Commodus' reign.

Although Babelon's proposal is possible, it raises some questions. Trajan did indeed declare Armenia a Roman province, but there is no evidence that such an era was used in Armenia. Moreover, Trajan's successor Hadrian deemed it prudent to relinquish some of the territorial gains of Trajan in the east, and Armenia once again became a kingdom with close ties to Parthia.¹⁹ The following decades saw Armenia changing hands frequently between Rome and Parthia. Since Armenia did not remain a Roman province, it seems unlikely that Babelon's proposed era was still in use there some 70 years later.

¹³ Plutarch *Antonius* 37.3; 50.1-4.

¹⁴ Dio Cassius *Roman history* 49.39-41, 44.

¹⁵ Ariobarzanes and his son Artavasdes IV were non-Artaxiad Median rulers appointed by Augustus.

¹⁶ E. Babelon, 'Artaxisata', *CRAI* 1911, pp. 370-1.

¹⁷ K.J. Basmadjian, *Numismatique générale de l'Arménie (monnaies arméniennes et autres monnaies frappées en Arménie)* (Venice, 1936) (in Armenian), pp. 63-4; P.Z. Bedoukian, *Roman Coins and Medallions Relating to Armenia* (Vienna, 1971) (in Armenian), pp. 191-4.

¹⁸ Kh. Mousheghian, *Monetary Circulation in Armenia (from the 5th c. BC to the 14th c. AD)* (Yerevan, 1983) (in Armenian with English summary), pp. 108-9.

¹⁹ *Vita Hadriani* 21.11; Lang, p. 142.

Renner considers the numbers as representing an era initiated in Armenia by the Parthian king Phraates IV (38-2 BC), thus dating the coins to the mid 1st century AD.²⁰

Marie-Louise Chaumont²¹ has conducted extensive research on these coins and has considered various possibilities for their date of issue. She disagrees with Babelon's classification, and regards the numbers 10 and 12 as representing regnal years and 67 and 69 the era of Artaxata. According to her, this era could have been initiated when the city was founded or when it was declared a metropolis, sometime during the mid or late 2nd century BC. Thus, she suggests the possibility that these coins were minted during the reign of Tigranes II or his son Artavasdes II. Chaumont's argument is reasonable, but since the exact date when Artaxata was founded is not known, nor the date when it was declared a metropolis, the date when these coins were minted remains uncertain.

In 1999, A. Mousheghian and G. Depeyrot published a corpus of ancient Armenian coins, which included these civic issues.²² They consider the numbers 67 and 69 as representing a Pompeian era initiated in 66 BC,²³ and thus place these coins in the years 1 BC/AD 1 and AD 2/3. They interpret the numbers 10 and 12 as the regnal years of Tigranes IV (8-5 BC, 2 BC - AD 1). However, their attribution suffers from inconsistencies. First, the two Pompeian years should correspond to AD 1/2 and AD 3/4.²⁴ Second, Tigranes IV did not reign for 10 years, let alone 12.

Michel Amandry discussed all the above hypotheses and considered a Pompeian era to be the most logical of the explanations provided.²⁵ In his article, he re-attributes a coin of group 2b to the civic issues of Artaxata, thus completing the numbering 10, 11 and 12 on the reverses.²⁶ Most recently, Vardanyan in a re-study of these coins concludes that the date on the coins is that of the Pompeian era corresponding to AD 1/2 and AD 3/4.²⁷ He also states that the numbering 10 - 12 represents Artaxata's civic era initiated when Tigranes IV became king of Armenia and awarded the title Metropolis to the city.²⁸

²⁰ V. von Renner, 'Eine bisher unbekannte griechische Münzstätte in Armenien,' *Mitteilungen der österreichischen Gesellschaft für Münzen und Medaillenkunde* 8.2 (1912), pp. 37-9, (which I have not seen).

²¹ M.L. Chaumont, 'A propos d'une ère d'Artaxata, capitale de la Grande Arménie,' *Revue des études arméniennes* 18 (1984), pp. 397-409.

²² A. Mousheghian and G. Depeyrot, *Hellenistic and Roman Armenian Coinage (1st c. BC - 1st c. AD)* (Wetteren, 1999), pp. 45-6.

²³ See below for the initiation date(s) of a Pompeian era.

²⁴ As rightly noted in R. Vardanyan, 'On the dating of two groups of Armenian coins of the Hellenistic era,' *Patma-Banasirakan Handes* 2 (1987) (in Russian with Armenian summary), pp. 195-207. Vardanyan was the first to propose a dating system based on a Pompeian era for these coins.

²⁵ M. Amandry, 'Du monnayage d'Artaxata et de soi-disant monnaies d'Aegospotami,' *BSFN* 9 (2002), pp. 173-7.

²⁶ The coin was at first erroneously attributed to Aegospotami in Thrace (*RPC* Supp. I, S-1738A). Attribution of this type to Artaxata is additionally supported by site finds (Vardanyan 2007, p. 71).


²⁷ Vardanyan 2007, pp. 69-77.

²⁸ Vardanyan 2007, p. 70. However, the author does not provide any proof for this assumption. To date, there is no evidence pointing to when Artaxata was declared a metropolis.

Dating these coins on the basis of a Pompeian era is problematic. There is no evidence that a Pompeian era was used in Armenia.²⁹ This era was initiated in city-states that were liberated or fell under the influence of Pompey during the 60s BC. For example, the autumn of 66 BC is regarded as the date for the initiation of a Pompeian era in Antioch, whereas in the case of Tripolis in Phoenicia, a Pompeian era started in 64/63 BC.³⁰ However, in the case of Artaxata, can this concept also apply? Armenia was a kingdom with Artaxata as her capital. Artaxata was not a city-state nor was it under the leadership of a foreign ruler. Before Pompey's arrival, Tigranes was the king of Armenia, and after the settlement with the Roman general, Tigranes remained the ruler of Armenia and continued to use the title King of Kings.³¹ Thus, the use of a Pompeian era in Artaxata is questionable, since there is no pretext for Artaxata being 'liberated' by Pompey, and no evidence as yet for the use of this era by kingdoms.

An Alternative Proposal

All the above authors attempt to attribute a date for these coins on the basis of the numbers on the reverse. This has given rise to a wide variety of dates, and the potential for many other alternatives. In the present paper, attribution will be made on the basis of a stylistic, iconographic and epigraphic analysis.

The civic bronzes under discussion have their closest parallel with the silver issues of Artaxias II. To date, four drachms have been attributed to this king. The obverse depicts the bust of Artaxias facing right wearing a diadem and an Armenian tiara, all within a wreath. The reverse has two types. The first depicts Athena to left holding a shield and spear (**Pl. 2, 7**). The second has the figure of Nike advancing right holding a wreath and a palm branch over her shoulder (**Pl. 2, 8**). The inscriptions on the reverse are circular and read ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΡΤΑΞΕΡΕΞΕΩ ΘΕΙΟΥ. In the right field are the letters (number) ΙΔ. The monogram  occurs in the exergue.

It will be evident that there is a remarkably close resemblance between the reverse of the only known coin of group 3a and the Nike type of Artaxias II (**Pl. 2, 5 and 8**): note the similar iconography of the Nike, the circular nature of the legends (Artaxias II was the first of the Artaxiads to adopt this format), and the identical monogram.

²⁹ For the proposed use of a Pompeian era on a bronze coin of Artaxias II, see R. Vardanyan, 'A dated copper coin of Artaxias II: evidence on the use of the Pompeian Era in Artaxata,' *Armenian Numismatic Journal* 27.4 (2001), pp. 89-94. However, the author's argument is inconclusive since it is based on a single bronze coin of Artaxias II bearing the field mark CA, which he interprets as ζΑ. Thus, according to his argument ζΑ = 36 = 30 BC on the basis of the Pompeian method of calculating years (66 BC - 36 = 30 BC). If indeed the field mark does represent a Pompeian era initiated in 66 BC, CA should rather be interpreted as ΓΑ = 33 BC (66 BC - 33 = 33 BC), a date when Artaxias II did not rule in Armenia.

³⁰ H. Seyrig, 'Antiquités syriennes 42: sur les ères de quelques villes de Syrie,' *Syria* 27 (1950), pp. 11 and 42. See also A.E. Samuel, *Greek and Roman Chronology: Calendars and Years in Classical Antiquity* (Munich, 1972), pp. 246-7.

³¹ Plutarch *Pompey* 33; Dio Cassius *Roman history* 36.52; Appian *Mithridatic wars* 104.

Some numismatists regard the monogram as that of Artaxata.³² However, the same monogram occurs on coins issued in Antioch by the Seleucid kings Seleucus IV, Alexander I and Antiochus VI.³³ If it were indeed the monogram of Armenia's capital, why does it vary between the second and third series of the civic bronzes? It is more likely that it represents the control mark of a moneyer or magistrate who issued both group 3 of the civic bronzes of Artaxata with number letters IB, and then the drachms of Artaxias II. There thus seems to be a sequence in the numbering on the civic issues (I, IA and IB) and those of Artaxias II (IΔ) (a coin with IΓ has yet to come to light).

Some numismatists consider the letters IΔ to represent Artaxias II's regnal year 14 = 20 BC, the very last year of his reign. This depends on the assumption that Artaxias considered himself as the rightful ruler of Armenia from 34 BC and not 30 BC, thus extending his reign to 14 years.³⁴ However, the pattern of silver minting by the Armenian kings suggests that it is more likely that the drachms were issued at the beginning of his reign. Tigranes II issued an abundance of tetradrachms (more than 1,000 known) minted in Antioch from the early period of his rule, but there is a major decrease in the output of tetradrachms minted in Armenia during his last years.³⁵ The decline in output of silver coinage is even more marked under his successors. We have three tetradrachms and 12 drachms of his son Artavasdes II, only four drachms for Artaxias II, a single drachm for Tigranes III and no silver coins at all for Tigranes IV, Artavasdes III and Tigranes V.³⁶

As for the historical background, we have seen above that there was a break in the rule of the Artaxiads during 34-30 BC. No coins were issued by the Armenian kings during this period, nor were any issued in the name of Alexander, son of Antony and Cleopatra. In the reign of Tigranes II and Artavasdes II Armenia was accustomed to minting and using bronze coins. During the gap of 3-4 years, it is plausible that bronze civic coins should have been issued in the Armenian capital to supply the local market. It is true that coins from neighbouring regions could have been used for this purpose, but this would be more likely in the case of silver, since bronze issues had limited geographical distribution and were designed primarily for local use.

The above new interpretation does not of course explain the two sets of numbering on the reverses of these coins (10 - 12 and 67 - 69). It is indeed

³² See Y.T. Nercessian, *Silver Coinage of the Artaxiad Dynasty of Armenia* (Los Angeles, 2006), p. 160.

³³ E.T. Newell, 'The Seleucid mint of Antioch,' *AJN* 51 (1917), pp. 123-51.

³⁴ Y. T. Nercessian, 'A silver coin of Artaxias II (30 - 20 B.C.),' *Armenian Numismatic Journal* 24 (1998), p. 31.

³⁵ 11 specimens known. These coins have on the reverse the letters ΖΛ, ΗΛ and ΘΛ, which are most probably regnal years corresponding to the 37th, 38th and 39th year of Tigranes' rule, i.e., 59/8, 58/7 and 57/6 BC. The same lettering also occurs on his drachms issued in Armenia.

³⁶ Nercessian 2006.

likely that they represent a double dating system, as pointed out by R. Göbl.³⁷ One of the dates could be based on an era initiated when Artaxata was declared a metropolis; but which of the two is it? Unfortunately, the historical sources on this matter are silent, and new evidence is needed to put this question to rest.³⁸

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³⁷ Cited in Chaumont 1984, pp. 402-403.

³⁸ My gratitude to Dr Kevin Butcher for reading the text of this article.

Key to Plate 2

1. Artaxata. AE 5.77g. *RPC* Suppl. 2-I-3844A.
2. Artaxata. AE 3.58 g. CNG, MBS 82 (Sep. 2009), 698.
3. Artaxata. AE 11.03g. *RPC* Suppl. 2-I-3844B.
4. Artaxata. AE 7.13g. *RPC* Suppl. 2-I-3844C.
5. Artaxata. AE 14.62g. *RPC* Suppl. 2-I-3844D.
6. Artaxata. AE 7.45g. *RPC* Suppl. 2-I-3844E.
7. Artaxias II. AR drachm 3.59g. CNG MBS 51 (Sep. 1999), 768.
8. Artaxias II. AR drachm 4.06g. Freeman & Sear FPL 6 (July 2001), F70.

PLATE 2



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