

# Collecting Coins and the Conflict in Syria\*

UTE WARTENBERG KAGAN

This short paper was compiled to provide more detailed evidence for a presentation delivered on 29 September 2015 at a symposium organized by the Department of State and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, titled “Conflict Antiquities: Forging a Public/Private Response to Save Iraq and Syria’s Endangered Cultural Heritage.”

Ancient coins were mass-produced and circulated widely throughout the Mediterranean world and as far away as China as a medium of exchange for monetary transactions. Since the 17th century scholars have been interested in recording find spots for antiquities, and in particular for hoards of coins. A large amount of information published in thousands of books and articles over the past 400 years gives some idea of what sort of material exists, enabling us to begin to understand coin circulation.

The looting of coins in Syria and Iraq (and elsewhere) is undoubtedly widespread, something that probably is linked to the massive number of previously unknown types of coins noted by academic numismatists coming to light over the last few years. As metal objects, coins are an ideal target for looters, as they are found by metal detecting, a practice that typically destroys the archaeological context of the find. Once found, coins can be more easily identified than most other categories of archaeological artifacts and therefore are probably highly valued by looters.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the multitude of online databases, such as those hosted by the ANS, coins are easily researched where the internet is available. Where it is not, books with archaeological and numismatic articles are probably also consulted, as the discovery of a rare scholarly volume in ISIL possession recently illustrated. When ISIL Commander Abu Sayyaf was captured in May, a significant number of coins among antiquities and other items were found as well.<sup>2</sup>

\* I am most grateful to the curatorial staff of the ANS for their help with this presentation.

1. Coins can be researched online thanks to the multitude of online databases. Books with archaeological and numismatic articles are probably also consulted. See the discovery of a scholarly book about ancient Syria with a cache of weapons <http://www.anspocketchange.org/isis-numismatics-and-conflict-antiquities/>.

2. See <http://eca.state.gov/cultural-heritage-center/iraq-cultural-heritage-initiative/isil-leaders-loot>.

Even so, actual hard evidence for coins coming from Syria and Iraq to the U.S. is virtually non-existent, or, to put it differently, not available to numismatic scholars. Despite the absence of hard evidence, it is possible to observe trends in the current numismatic marketplace that when placed against the backdrop of earlier numismatic scholarship indicate the strong probability that a significant number of certain types of coins on today's market likely originated in Syria, something that most coin collectors and many dealers in the U.S. are largely unaware of. But, and this is a point I must underscore, these observations can only be applied to a specific selection of ancient coinage since many other coin types circulated in Syria but at the same time circulated elsewhere as well. The following three case studies illustrate what I mean. They highlight the difficulties in determining coins of Syrian origin.

### CASE 1: THE RADIATE COINAGE OF ZENOBIA AND VABALATHUS AUGUSTUS

Zenobia, the legendary queen of Palmyra, and her son, Vabalathus, issued a series of coins in Antioch (Syria) for about three months from for about three months from March to May of 272 CE. In an excellent article in the *Numismatic Chronicle* 2011, Roger Bland studied the entire coinage of Zenobia and Vabalathus, who issued several series of coins at Antioch in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt.<sup>3</sup> For the discussion here, the coinage of Zenobia and Vabalathus-as-Augustus, minted in Antioch, are of particular relevance. In fact, the coinage with Zenobia's portrait was so rare that the single known specimen in the 19th century was suspected to be a counterfeit.



Figure 1. The American Numismatic Society's collection contains only one coin of Vabalathus Augustus (<http://numismatics.org/collection/1944.100.30790>), which was purchased by E. T. Newell. Its first appearance was in an auction of Rollin and Feudardent of 1898.



Figure 2. An example of the rare Zenobia coinage with a provenance dating to 1990. (NAC 64, 2012, 1266; ex NAC 38, 2007, 183; ex NFA XXV, 1990, 457).

Bland gives a few findspots of these exceedingly rare coins: only one coin comes from a hoard (Hama, Syria), and one single coin has an archaeologically secure context (Antioch excavations); the other findspots are based on verbal information from secondary sources, which give Syria, Lebanon, or Israel as the potential provenance.<sup>4</sup> It is thus the extreme rarity of these objects that makes this case particularly telling in the current light of new finds, but it should be pointed out that Bland already noted the surge of new specimens in 2010 when he was almost finished with his study. He compiled a table, which shows the coins as they came to light over the last two centuries.<sup>5</sup>

3. R. Bland, "The Coinage of Vabalathus and Zenobia from Antioch and Alexandria," *Numismatic Chronicle* 171 (2011), 133–186; plates 15–25. [https://www.academia.edu/2525613/\\_The\\_coinage\\_of\\_Vabalathus\\_and\\_Zenobia\\_from\\_Antioch\\_and\\_Alexandria\\_Numismatic\\_Chronicle\\_171\\_201](https://www.academia.edu/2525613/_The_coinage_of_Vabalathus_and_Zenobia_from_Antioch_and_Alexandria_Numismatic_Chronicle_171_201)

4. Bland (2011), 150.

5. Bland (2011), 152.

Bland collected 152 specimens from museums, private collections, and auction records. Below is an update of Bland's study from 2011: data were collected until early September 2015, which added 27 new coins to Bland's original catalogue. Numismatists will find it interesting that no new obverse dies were in the new coins discovered since 2010. This fact indicates that all of the coins discovered in the past six years originated from the same mint as the previously discovered coins.

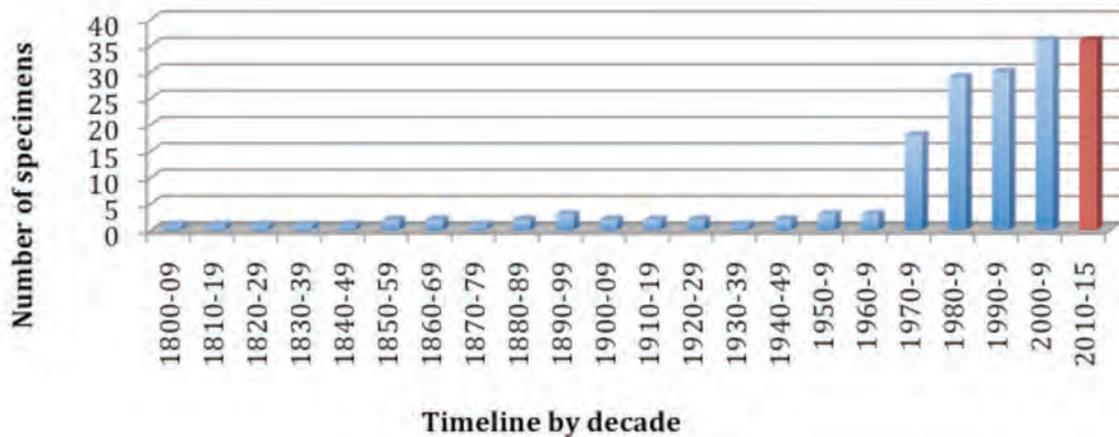


Figure 3. Chart illustrating the total number of coins of Zenobia and Vabalathus Augustus that have appeared in auction sales since 1880 arranged by decade.

This first chart (Fig. 3) plots the appearance of specimens by decade, and it is notable that already in the first six years of the current decade (2010–2015), indicated by the red bar, the number of coins is higher than in the entire decade of 2000–2009.

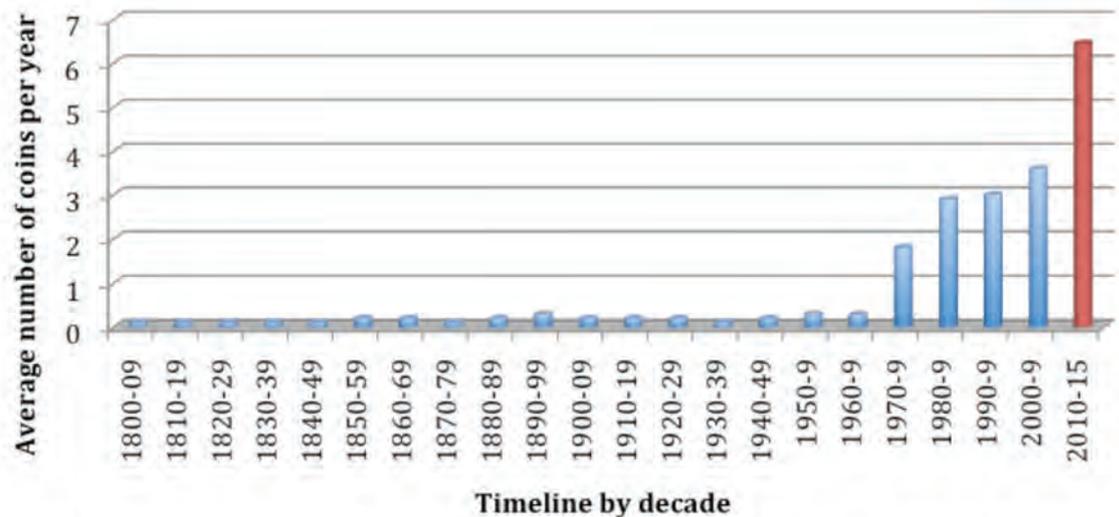


Figure 4. Chart illustrating the average number of coins of Zenobia and Vabalathus Augustus sold per year at auction since 1880 arranged by decade.

Chart two above (Fig. 4) gives an even clearer picture of the increase: it plots coins per year, which have appeared over the last two centuries. Here the last six years show a substantial increase.

If we now examine in more detail the last four years, Table 1 (below) illustrates that the surge in the previous six years is largely due to coins found in 2012–2015. The high figure for 2012 is of interest, as it might indicate that at the beginning of the civil war in Syria in 2011 already contributed to the increase.

Table 1. Examples in Bland, NC 2010 and new coins 2010–August 2015.

Bland variety	Type	Bland study 2010	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
13	Vabalathus/AETERNITAS AVG	5			1		1	1
17	Vabalathus/AEQVITAS	19			2	1		
15	Vabalathus/VIRTUS AVG	16			1		2	
19	Vabalathus/IVENVVS AVG	14				1		
20	Vabalathus/IVENVVS AVG	12	1		1	2	1	1
22	Vabalathus/VENVS AVG	12						1
25	Vabalathus/IOVI STATORI	10			2		1	
27	Vabalathus/VICTORIA AVG	14					2	1
29	Zenobia/IVNO REGINA	23		1				3
TOTAL		125	1	1	7	4	7	7

## CONCLUSION

There has been a significant surge of radiate coins of Zenobia and Vabalathus Augustus on the market in the last four years. When considering such figures, it is important to realize that there is no evidence beyond the statistical data that links any of these specimens in auctions to findspots in Syria. However, I would consider the probability of these coins originating in Syria as high. If such coins were offered without any prior provenance, I would advise thorough due diligence and ask for more detail about the country of origin.

## CASE 2: KYME AND OTHER SO-CALLED WREATHED TETRADRACHMS

The second case study discussed here is a group of coins minted in c. 155–c. 140 BCE in Western Turkey, which are found largely in ancient Syria. These coins, mainly tetradrachms and some drachms, were made as a coordinated effort in the middle of the second century BCE in the cities of Myrina, Kyme, Aigai (Aeolis), Magnesia, Smyrna, Heraclea-ad-Latmon, Lebedos, and Kolophon.

The following photos illustrate the eight coin types. All specimens are from the collection of the American Numismatic Society.



Figure 5. Kyme: <http://numismatics.org/collection/1948.19.1171>.



Figure 6. Myrina: <http://numismatics.org/collection/1944.100.44224>.



Figure 7. Aigai (Aeolis) <http://numismatics.org/collection/1975.218.29>.



Figure 8. Smyrna <http://numismatics.org/collection/1967.152.450>.



Figure 9. Herakleia ad Latmum <http://numismatics.org/collection/1967.152.443>.



Figure 10. Lebedos <http://numismatics.org/collection/1967.152.444>.



Figure 11. Kolophon <http://numismatics.org/collection/1976.107.1>.



Figure 12. Distribution of hoards of Kyme from the sixth to first centuries BCE recorded in *IGCH*.

These coins are all quite similar in appearance: made on thin, hammered flans, they show the head of a deity on the obverse, and another motif within a wreath on the reverse. Richard Ashton states in his article on Hellenistic coins from Asia Minor in the *Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Coinage*: “Virtually all specimens with known provenances were found in hoards from Seleucid territory in south-central/southeastern Turkey and Syria, and it seems clear that they were not intended for domestic use in western Asia Minor.”<sup>6</sup>

Modern Syria is therefore at the center of the recorded findspots, although the largest recorded find is from Kirikhan, directly on the Turkish-Syrian border, some 50 miles north-west of Aleppo.

6. R. Ashton, “The Hellenistic World: The Cities of Mainland Greece and Asia Minor,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Coinage*, edited by W. E. Metcalf (Oxford, 2012), 198.

This find came to light in 1972, and was partially recorded before being dispersed on the market.<sup>7</sup> For this paper, the tetradrachms of Kyme in Aeolis were considered in more detail to determine whether there is a statistically significant increase of coins on the market. The map above (Fig. 12) shows all hoards with coins of Kyme, recorded prior to the 1973 publication of the *Inventory of Greek Coin Hoards* (coinhoards.org) The hoards of the relevant Hellenistic series are highlighted in a red oval; the square in western Turkey indicates the location of Kyme. This map is derived from [http://nomisma.org/id/cyme\\_aeolis](http://nomisma.org/id/cyme_aeolis).

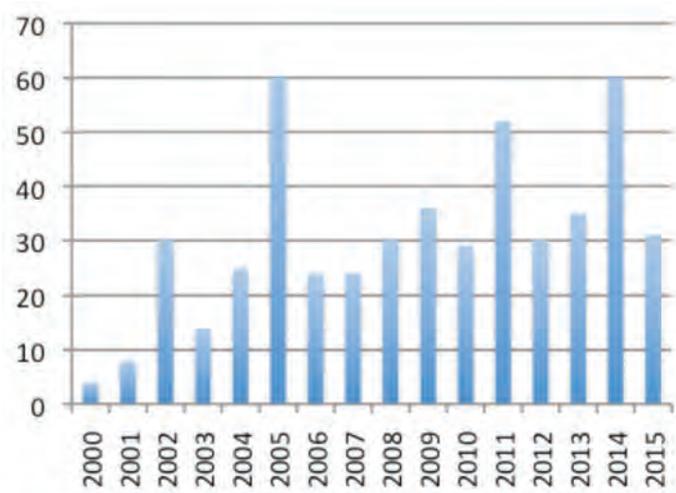


Figure 13. Chart illustrating the number of Kyme tetradrachms sold per year at auction since 2000.

A die-study of the wreathed tetradrachms of Kyme was published by John Oakley in 1982 for which he collected some 540 coins, which were issued by 12 magistrates, whose names appear on the coins.<sup>8</sup> Since then a number of large hoards have added a considerable amount of material. If one plots the number of new specimens since 2001 by year, it becomes apparent that the number of new coins on the market has been rising for some time, and not only since the beginning of the conflict in Syria (see Fig. 13). However, a peak is noticeable for most of the series for 2014.

Considering that the hoard of Kirikhan had more than 5,000 coins, it is conceivable that one or two hoards could be responsible for this increase of new coins on the market. One has to be careful not to over-interpret such data, which on its own might be not mean much. However, if one analyzed other coins of Western Asia in this group of wreathed tetradrachms, an overall increase in the number of such coins offered would probably be noticeable.

For Myrina, for example, an initial count of specimens on coinarchives.com produced almost 130 coins that were offered for sale in 2014. In his die-study of this series in 1985, Kenneth Sacks knew of a total of 536 coins, which were collected from most major European museums and auctions catalogues. Without a thorough study, however, as was undertaken for Kyme for this paper, it is impossible to determine how many of these coins have an earlier provenance, particularly since a significant number of entries in the auctions do not cite any prior collection or auction record.

7. *Coin Hoards* I. 87A-B; II.90; VIII. 460.

8. John H. Oakley, "The Autonomous Wreathed Tetradrachms of Kyme, Aeolis", *American Numismatic Society Museum Notes* 27 (1982), 1–37.

## CONCLUSION

The coins of Kyme as well as other related mints are known to have been found mainly in Syria, and the marked increase over the last five years may well be connected to conflict in this region. However, it is also possible that a hoard from the Turkish border region (in the ancient region of Cilicia) or Lebanon is responsible for the coins offered in such quantities.

It should be noted that most collectors, dealers, and even scholars are unaware that most coins of the wreathed tetradrachm series circulated almost exclusively in the region of Syria and neighboring areas, due to the fact that the coins were minted thousands of kilometers away.

Without any other information about an unprovenanced coin from these series, I would suggest extraordinary diligence on such items. As many of the older, provenanced coins have been more or less studied, provenance research is relatively straightforward.

### CASE 3: ARCHAIC GREEK COINAGE IN SYRIA

The last case study exemplifies how it is almost impossible to determine a Syrian provenance for many coins, if one is not told about such a find provenance. As an example (out of many possibilities), I have chosen the famous hoard of Massyaf in Syria, which was reported to have been found there in 1961.



Figure 14. Map indicating the location of Massyaf in Syria.

The hoard is stored today almost in its entirety in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris. It was published in 1968 by Colin Kraay and Roger Moorey.<sup>9</sup> The hoard contains coins of the Classical period, some of which were cut into fragments, as well as pieces of jewelry. It is one of many hoards from the Near East and Egypt that illustrate the circulation of early coinage in this region. Most of the mints in this hoard are from the areas of Greece, Sicily, and other parts of the Mediterranean, as the map in Fig. 15 illustrates.

9. Colin M. Kraay and P. R. S. Moorey, "Two Fifth Century Hoard from the Near East", *Revue Numismatique* 6 (1968), 181–235. [http://www.persee.fr/doc/numi\\_0484-8942\\_1968\\_num\\_6\\_10\\_966](http://www.persee.fr/doc/numi_0484-8942_1968_num_6_10_966).



Figure 15. Distribution map of mints in the hoard from Massyaf, Syria (*IGCH 1483*).



Figure 16. Distribution map of mints in the hoard from Benha El Asl (*IGCH 1640*).

Similar hoards come from many other countries: one example chosen from dozens of such hoards shows how similar the composition in such Late Archaic or Classical hoards can be: the Benha el Asl hoard from Egypt (*IGCH* 1640) has many features that resemble that of Massyaf in Syria (see Fig. 16).<sup>10</sup>

The point of these two examples is to show that for certain periods, Syrian or Iraqi heritage is not easily recognizable. Once such hoards enter the market and are disbursed, it is almost impossible to reconstruct their contents, and nowadays, the findspots of such hoards, if they do appear, remain unknown.

### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

In order to actively protect Syrian and Iraqi heritage, it is essential to have knowledge about that heritage and its objects. For numismatists, this is a huge challenge. As it is clear from my comments above, I am only a specialist of ancient coins, whereas the problem of looted coins from Syria and Iraq needs numismatists with many different fields of expertise. Furthermore, museum collections in Syria are not well published, and as a number of numismatic collections were looted, it is highly likely that some museum material has come on the market.

Therefore, a much better understanding of the numismatic heritage of Syria as we know from older records is needed. Some of this work is in progress, and by digitizing the large archival resources of hoards at museums such as the American Numismatic Society, it would be easier to educate collectors, dealers, archaeologists, and others interested in this material. Without databases of such resources, only few specialists will be able to recognize that some coins might well have come from Syria or Iraq.

I believe that museums and collectors genuinely want to avoid buying looted coins, which might be connected to ISIL or indeed any other terrorist or criminal activities.

Therefore, due diligence in buying ancient or medieval coins at the ANS involves these following steps:

For a statement on the American Numismatic Society's guidelines see <http://numismatics.org/About/ComplianceProcedures>.

1. The first rule is that ancient coins come from somewhere. They are not originally found in the U.S., and one must inquire whether coins entered the U.S. legally. Our guidelines make it clear that as curators we respect the laws of all other countries from which coins might come. If in doubt, we ask for paperwork. We also buy only from dealers who we know personally. I know this is a difficult rule in times of online auctions, etc., but I consider it a useful one when it comes to due diligence.
2. In cases where a Syrian or Iraqi origin is likely, the rule is simple: we do not buy anything that does not have a well-documented provenance—ideally before 1970—but if this is not possible, we require a solidly documented provenance over 10 years or more. If no provenance is available, the motto is clear: “Assume the worst.” The probability that a fresh coin on the market has an old provenance is very slim.

10. Other archaic hoards from Egypt are all listed under *IGCH* 1632–1652. *IGCH* and *Coin Hoards* provide dozens of hoards from other all over the Mediterranean and the Middle East, which are the basis of our understanding of Archaic and early Classical coinage.

3. We research provenance in detail, as an old auction record mentioned in a modern catalogue might not be correct. A clearly verifiable photo, with weight and other information, which comes from an earlier auction, is ideal. The American Numismatic Society has one of the largest collections of such numismatic auction catalogues as well as a card file of coins from auctions dating back to the beginning of the 20th century. Furthermore, the commercial website of [coinarchives.com](http://coinarchives.com), which records coins from auctions since c. 2000, is a very useful tool.
4. For the last few years, the American Numismatic Society has rejected gifts that originated from online auctions, which have no permanent record of their sales or limited information about sellers. To put it differently, we do not consider gifts of coins that give eBay or other online sites as a provenance, if no other verifiable, older provenance is available.
5. We encourage our members to follow these guidelines for their own collections. Increasingly, members of the Society come to consult our auction catalogues and our card files, resources which include more than 100,000 ancient coin records.
6. Perhaps one of the most important parts of the acquisition process is the immediate publication of all new objects in an online database. The American Numismatic Society's database, MANTIS, has been a leader in the field of publishing its holdings online by using Linked Open Data (LOD). All new acquisitions are photographed and described, and the staff usually puts new acquisitions online within a few weeks. MANTIS went online in 1997 and has been continuously updated (<http://numismatics.org/search/>).

The screenshot shows the MANTIS database interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'MANTIS' and various menu items like 'Department', 'Browse', 'Search', 'Maps', 'Compare', 'Charts', 'APIs', and 'ANS Home'. A search bar is on the right. Below the navigation bar, there are sections for 'Data Options', 'Keyword' (with a search input), and 'Refine Results' (with dropdown menus for Authority, Deity, Denomination, Department, Material, Mint, Object Type, Reference, and Region). The main content area is titled 'Filters Map Results' and shows a search for '2015.1.1'. It displays 'Displaying records 1 to 1 of 1 total results.' and a 'Select from List' dropdown. The record details for 'Silver Tetradrachm, Syracuse, 405 BC - 400 BC. 2015.1.1' are shown, including Date, Denomination, Mint, Obverse, Reverse, Diameter, Weight, Reference, and Provenance. Two images of the coin are displayed on the right. At the bottom, there is a 'Date Range' section with 'From Date' and 'To Date' inputs.

Figure 17. Screenshot of MANTIS displaying the record for ANS 2015.1.1.

Other ANS Open Access online resources include the online library catalogue, DONUM (<http://donum.numismatics.org/>), the online archives, ARCHER (<http://numismatics.org/archives/>), and now its Digital Library (<http://numismatics.org/digitallibrary/>), which will host OCR-scanned auction catalogues as well as ebook versions of ANS monographs and journals. With this suite of Open Access online tools and publications, anyone can have free,

continuous access to the cumulative output of acquisitions, research, and scholarship by the ANS.

7. If the Society receives competing claims of ownership for material in the collection, the staff investigates diligently whether an item was unlawfully acquired, exported or imported. We seek to resolve such matters in an equitable and mutually agreeable manner.
8. Last, but not least, the Society's curatorial staff is committed to taking a more active role to raise awareness about the destruction of national heritage in other countries and the impact of looting of antiquities, including coins, on civil war and human suffering. While it is impossible to undo damage that has been done by looters and others, we will engage collectors, dealers, archaeologists, legislators, and law enforcement officials in a dialogue that creates a 21st-century academic discipline and hobby for serious coin collectors as it should be undertaken.