

THE 'CORONATION COIN'
OF THE THRACIAN KING RHOEMETALCES III

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The use of the term 'coronation coin' seems quite appropriate for the unique coin issue made in Thrace in 38 AD to celebrate the enthronement of the Roman client Rhoemetalces III. One of these coins, which shows the investiture of Rhoemetalces III, is kept in the Sofia Archaeological Institute and Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (invent. no. 6801):

Obverse: Laureate bust of Caligula. Dotted border.

ΓΑΙΩ ΚΑΙΣΑΡΙ ΓΕΡΜΑΝΙ[...]

Reverse: Rhoemetalces standing to l. receives diadem from Roman emperor seated to r. in curule chair.

ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΡΟΙΜΗΤΑΛΚΑΣ/ΚΟΤΙΩΣ

Bronze. Weight 29 g, diam. 27 mm (Fig. 1).

This quite rare coin was found in Thrace. I suppose that the model for it was the Roman sestertius. The denomination, size, weight and minting technique have no analogies in Thracian copper coinage. It is clear that the model for the image of the Roman emperor on the obverse was Caligula's portrait on a Roman imperial sestertius. It is not difficult to see iconographic parallels in the execution of the portrait of the emperor in Thracian and Roman coinage. The history of Romano-Thracian relations has not been elucidated satisfactorily by written and epigraphic sources, and this coin can provide some information on the circumstances behind Rhoemetalces III's accession to the Thracian throne. The coin reflects the apogee of Roman influence in Thrace, which began in the reign of Cotys II (VII), who was supported by Augustus after the suppression of the Thracian revolt, and continued under Rhoemetalces I, who was tutor of the children of Cotys V or Cotys VII. Thracian coinage immediately reflected the Roman presence in the state: the traditional figure of Nike, personifying the military victories of the Thracians disappeared from the obverse of Thracian coins to be replaced by a portrait of the Roman emperor, with his title in Greek. Rhoemetalces I did not usually put a royal title on his early coins (Youroukova 1976, 90). He was then probably content with the title of *dynast*, a title whose low rank allowed its omis-



Fig. 1.

sion (Saprykin 1993, 47). Later, monograms of the names and titles of Roman emperors appeared on his coins. These were minted in particular in Byzantium. They were found, for example, in Tyras and among the coins of the Sadievo hoard in Bulgaria (Shönert-Geiss 1972, 43, fig. 1302; Diamont 1982, 114-7; Youroukova 1974, 32). This tradition continued until the reign of Rhoemetalces III.

Let us turn our attention to written sources and epigraphic data concerning the events preceding the enthronement of Rhoemetalces III. It is known that after the death of Rhoemetalces I in 12 BC, Augustus divided Thrace between Rhescuporis III and Cotys III (VIII). The first was the brother of Rhoemetalces I, the second his son. The coins of the co-rulers had the portraits of Augustus and then Tiberius on the obverse. In 19 AD Rhescuporis III took power from his nephew and killed him. For this he was exiled to Alexandria, where he died in mysterious circumstances. Thrace was repartitioned between Rhoemetalces II, son of Rhescuporis II, and the sons of Cotys III, who were under Roman guardianship, led by the ex-praetor Trebellienus Rufus (Tac., *Ann.* 3. 38). In 19-26 AD Roman clients ruled their parts of Thrace as dynasts. In 21 AD there was a revolt against Rhoemetalces II and the Roman magistrates, who were besieged in Philippopolis. Auxiliary cavalry and *cohortes* of bowmen, under the command of the Governor of Moesia, came to the aid of Rhoemetalces II. The revolt was suppressed and Thracian dynasts (or 'kings' according to Tacitus) continued to be considered Roman allies, supplying the imperial army with auxiliary troops (Tac., *Ann.* 4. 5).

In 26 AD the Thracians revolted again, but they were cruelly suppressed by the new Governor of Moesia, Poppaeus Sabinus, the commander of the legion and Rhoemetalces II, together with those Thracians who had remained loyal to Rome (Tac., *Ann.* 4. 46-51). After these last events the narrative dries up:

books VII to X and the start of book XI of the *Annals* have been lost. They provided an account from the death of Tiberius in 37 AD through the reign of Caligula into the early years of that of Claudius. It was during this time that the last Thracian king, Rhoemetalces III, reigned, after which Thrace lost its independence. Thus, information concerning his enthronement, which might have been contained in those books, has not reached us.

Epigraphic evidence from Thrace, Cyzicus, and the Pontic Kingdom has provided some material with which it is possible to reconstruct events in Thrace. In the opinion of Saprykin (1993, 32; 48), two children of Cotys III, Rhoemetalces III and Phythodorida, were settled in Thrace in 19 AD under the care of Roman patrons, in particular Lucius Antonius Zenonus known from epigraphic and numismatic sources. The other children, Polemon II and Cotys IV, are not mentioned in Thracian inscriptions. They were probably with their mother in Pontus, and were removed to Rome in 26 AD, where they joined Rhoemetalces III and Phythodorida. When all the children of Cotys III were in Rome, Rhoemetalces II received the title of Thracian king. He put on his coins the portrait of Tiberius, patron of his dynasty. In about 38 AD Rhoemetalces II died and Caligula gave the title of Thracian king to Rhoemetalces III. At the same time, Polemon II received the title of King of Bosphorus and Pontus. There was one more heir of Cotys III, Cotys IV, who was enthroned in Armenia Minor in 39 AD. Rhoemetalces III was the only son of Cotys III to be enthroned by Caligula who celebrated the event with a special commemorative issue.

Although this coin was undoubtedly issued in Thrace, its denomination and iconography are near to those of a Roman sestertius. The commemorative coin of Rhoemetalces III joins a small group of Roman imperial coins depicting the enthronement of a Roman client in a vassal state. Throughout the Imperial period there were only six other such issues we know of: 37/38 AD (in Caesaria in Cappadocia) Caligula in honour of the coronation of the Armenian king Artatias (*BMC* II, pl. 28, 1); 116 AD by Trajan in honour of the coronation of Parthamaspatēs (type '*Rex Parthis datus*': Regling 1924, no. 884); 140-144 AD by Antoninus Pius (type '*Rex Quadis datus*': Kölnik 1984, nos. 5-6); ca. 160 AD by Antoninus again, in honour of the investiture of the Armenian king (type '*Rex Armenius datus*': Mattingly 1928, pl. XLIII, 14; Brilliant 1963, 153); 163 AD by Lucius Verus confirming Sohaemus as king of Armenia (the same type: *BMC* IV, pl. 75, 8); 244-249 AD (in Edessa) Gordian III gave a crown to the king of Osroene (Mattingly 1928, 208, pl. LII, 6).

The majority of these coins were issued in small quantities, sometimes in silver and gold, sometimes in bronze (*sestertii* only). Undoubtedly, this emission had a commemorative meaning first of all. *Sestertii* of this type were originally worn as medallions: their large field provided engravers with good compositional opportunities. Probably, the silver and golden coins were so-called 'strew' coins, thrown to the guards and suite during the investiture ceremony. Gradually, two types of image appeared on coinage. One shows a seated

emperor, sometimes surrounded by a group of officers, and the vassal king receiving his crown; the other shows standing figures of the emperor and his vassal. The coins of Rhoemetalces III were of the former type. It is important to note that the majority of 'coronation coins' were found on the territory of vassal states, for example the *sestertius* of Rhoemetalces III, or that of '*Rex Quadis datus*' found in Pannonia.

The *sestertius* of Rhoemetalces III opens this small series of 'coronation coins', reflecting the successes of Roman foreign policy. Of course, not all acts of investiture are reflected in coins: none was dedicated to the enthronements of Rhoemetalces III's brothers, Polemon II and Cotys IV, nor to that of Tiridates, who received the crown from Nero in 66 AD, although this last event was celebrated in Rome with great pomp. Perhaps, everything depended on the situation and the conjuncture of official propaganda. So, the eldest son of Cotys III, Rhoemetalces III, marked his elevation from dynast to king by striking a special coin. Polemon II did not issue such a coin because the political situation in his realm was very complicated. Thus, the 'coronation coin' of Rhoemetalces III, although an epilogue to the Thracian kingdom, inaugurates or is, perhaps, the second of this kind of commemorative issue. Only two or three of these coins are known to have survived.

After Caligula's death dynastic discord continued to occur in Thrace. The population was discontented with the recruitment of Thracians into the Roman army and frequently revolted. In 46 AD Claudius overthrew the local dynast and liquidated the remains of Thracian independence. Thrace was partitioned: the south became a province under the government of a procurator, the north was included in Moesia.

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