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Author(s): J. Grafton Milne

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GRAECO-ROMAN LEADEN TESSERAE FROM ABYDOS

BY J. GRAFTON MILNE, M.A.

[See Plate XI]

AMONGST the objects found in a tomb (D. 221) excavated by Mr Peet at Abydos during the season 1912–13 were a few small stamped pieces of lead which possess rather exceptional interest. The tomb in question had originally been a vaulted brick one of a common Ptolemaic type, but the vault had been destroyed and the walls only remained to the height of about a foot. Over it a house had been built, presumably in Coptic times: and a number of small articles which had formed part of the tomb-furniture appear to have been left in odd corners when the foundations of the house were being laid and were found, partly under the floor of the house, partly in a narrow space between the foundations of the north wall of the house and the remains of the north wall of the tomb.

There can be little doubt as to the date of the tomb. Under the floor of the house there were eight bronze coins of late Ptolemaic and early Roman date, as follows:—*Ptolemaic*: Svoronos 975, 1424, and 1426 (four specimens), (the first of these types is attributed by Svoronos to Ptolemy III and the others to Ptolemy VI, but in the latter case at any rate I am certain his dating is too early); *Roman*: Dattari 29 (year 41 of Augustus) and 156 (year 13 of Claudius). The last-mentioned coin gives an upper limit of date in 52–3 A.D. The other objects found—a small leaden bowl, a bronze ornamental knob, a bronze nail and arrow-head, some pieces of egg-shell, several shells, including two cowries, and some large spherical beads of carnelian and poor blue glaze—are typical of Ptolemaic tombs, and would suggest that the date was not late in the Roman period, probably not long after 53 A.D. With these, in the space between the walls, were associated the leaden pieces.

These are five in number, of three types:—

- (a) *Obv.*—Bust of Athene r., wearing crested Corinthian helmet.
Rev.—Animal seated r., with tail erect and l. forepaw raised: under paw, head of ibis r.: whole in circular incuse. *Size* 14 mm.
- (b) *Obv.*—Beardless male head r.: line border.
Rev.—Animal walking l.: in circular incuse. *Size* 15 mm.
- (c) *Obv.*—Male head r., apparently wearing diadem and ceremonial beard: border of dots.
Rev.—Ibis standing r., with flail across shoulder: border of dots: whole in circular incuse. 3 specimens. *Sizes* 14, 13, 13 mm.

The execution of these is so poor that it is difficult to say with certainty what

Leaden Tesserae from Abydos.

Enlarged 2:1.

creatures are represented. There can be little doubt, I think, that (c) is intended to show an ibis, though the bird is tilted back on its tail in a very unnatural manner: and the ibis head on (a) is clear. The animal on (a) is more puzzling: its attitude is typical of a griffin, but it hardly looks like a normal griffin, and I am inclined to call it a cat. The animal on (b) would also do very well for a cat: the alternative would be an ichneumon. We appear therefore to have on the reverses representations of sacred animals.

Of the obverse types, that on (a) is clear: it is Athene, who is found in the miscellaneous assortment of identifications of Graeco-Roman times in Egypt as the equivalent of two native goddesses—Neit and Taurt. The head on (b) has no visible characteristics. But that on (c) is more interesting: the engraver seems to have intended to give it the beard of an Egyptian king and the Greek royal diadem: and I think we may see in this a head of Osiris produced under Greek influence. The obverse types would accordingly be of deities, although not of deities normally associated with the sacred animals on the reverses.

The purpose of these little objects is also a puzzle. In the latter part of the second century A.D. and probably most of the third, leaden tokens were in all probability used in many districts of Egypt as currency of low values (see my article on the leaden token-coinage of Egypt under the Romans in *Numismatic Chronicle*, 1908, p. 287): but those tokens are distinctly of a later style than the Abydos pieces: and the economic reasons which led to the use of a token-coinage did not apply in the middle of the first century. The bulk of the leaden tokens, also, suggest that their designers had in view their use as coins, and are reminiscent of the regular coinage of the Alexandrian mint: the Abydos pieces bear no resemblance whatever, in style or types, to any coinage current in Egypt. A number of leaden imitations of coins of Ptolemaic date are known: but they are all exact copies of current silver or bronze currency, and obviously intended for fraudulent purposes. No one could have been induced to imagine that the Abydos pieces were the equivalent of any coins circulating in the reign of Claudius: and, as Egypt was then well supplied with coins of all needful denominations, there was no call for a token-currency for low values. I think that there is practically no reason to suppose that our leaden pieces were intended for a token-coinage.

The character of the reverses seems rather to be reminiscent of seal-impressions than of coins: and this might suggest that the stamped lumps of lead were intended to serve much the same purpose as the lumps of clay bearing impressions from signets which have been found in several localities amongst remains of Graeco-Roman date in Egypt, and were attached to goods as marks of ownership. There is a leaden tessera described and figured in Signor Dattari's catalogue of his collection (no. 6506, plate xxxvii) which is shown by the inscription upon it—*Μεσσαλίνης κτῆσις*—to have been such a mark: it has as types a standing figure of Messalina, copied with slight variations from the reverse of tetradrachms of her husband Claudius, and a cynocephalus baboon. But, though its date must be fairly close to that of our Abydos pieces, the style is very different. It is possible that the Abydos specimens may have been intended as owner's labels, and, if so, having regard to the religious nature of the types, I should be inclined to regard them as having been used to distinguish temple-property.

On the whole, however, the circumstances of their discovery seem against this supposition: temple-property was not likely to have been buried in a grave, and there would not be much point in detaching the labels from such property and putting them amongst the grave-furniture. The most probable explanation that occurs to me is that these may have been issued by temples as a kind of worshipper's tokens, possibly for use as amulets. Mr Quibell suggested to me some years ago that the little limestone figures which he found in and about the shrine of Bes at Saqqara, and which he proved to have been executed in the precinct (see his *Excavations at Saqqara*, 1905-1906, p. 13), may have served such a purpose: and, if this be accepted, it would be quite natural that the tokens should be placed in the grave, whether as amulets or merely as certificates of worship performed at a temple. In this connexion it may be noted that Dr Otto placed the whole series of Egyptian leaden tesserae in possible relation with temples in his view that they were *σύμβολα*, or tokens entitling the holder to rations, such as are mentioned in the Serapeum-papyri as having been issued to the twin girls serving in that temple to enable them to claim an allowance of oil (*Priester und Tempel*, II. 131 and note 4). For the reasons briefly set forth in the postscript to my article mentioned above, I am unable to accept this view as regards the bulk of these tesserae: but it is of interest that he should have suggested the possibility of their issue by the temples, which I regard as probable, although for a different purpose, in the case of the specimens from Abydos.