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DID THE ASSYRIANS COIN MONEY?

FROM time to time not a few questions have received positive reply rather from the absence of knowledge than from exact information or legitimate reasoning. A century ago such definite assertion on questions of Biblical archæology was regarded as legitimate, and each assertion, made by men reputed to be learned, was an addition to the accumulating mass of authority on the point. It seems to have occurred to few to suspect that in the matter of learning there was little to choose between the authorities, for there was next to nothing for any one to learn. So the latest assertion on either side added no real weight to the first that was uttered.

The recovery of a long-lost language and a whole literature must needs set men revising opinions previously expressible with the most comfortable certainty. Hence it is to be expected that even the opinions of the learned on matters concerned with Assyrian or Babylonian antiquities will now be called in question. Further still, we have now in our possession, not only books and the longer sort of documents in a fairly well understood language, from which we may gather up hints; but a vast number of business memoranda, private contracts, commercial lists, receipts, and other purely personal and individual matters, noted with all the circumstantial accuracy of men to whom the shekel was an object of deep concern.

Did the Assyrians possess coined money? The answer hitherto given has been a decided negative. Ancient historians (Herodotus, I. 94, for example) are positive that the Lydians were the first to use coins. The reiteration of that statement by innumerable scholars adds no weight to it, unless they have independent information on the point. It may, however, be doubted whether the Father of History meant to deny coins to the Assyrians. A calculated

and systematized currency, with a clear understanding of its commercial powers and advantages, may rather be the achievement which he ascribes to Lydia. Taking the statement in the baldest sense much will depend on what is the correct theoretical definition of a coin. It is certain the Assyrians came very near to using coins. It is, of course, possible they never took the final step. An interesting parallel to this may be found from their own history. The later documents show the syllabic signs becoming more and more indifferent to the quality of their included vowels. At the same time the actual alphabetic, or rather monosyllabic, signs, usually called Aramaic letters, were perfectly familiar to them. The two systems of writing occur side by side on the same tablet. Yet Nineveh fell before its inhabitants had an alphabet of their own.

At one period a not too exacting observer might have returned to Greece with the assertion that Assyria had an alphabet; and the more careful he was to inquire into the matter, the more arguments he could find for his assertion. Yet it would not have been strictly true. So a very accurate observer, with a high standard of what currency should be, might deny the existence of coinage, while admitting the great advances made in its direction. To one who was not a trained political economist, the advantages of the Lydian system might easily seem so great that any previous attempts would be regarded with an unfair contempt. Admiration for the new method would be all the keener, while its novelty added a charm. To this we may fairly add the doubt how far Herodotus was actually acquainted with the domestic economy of Nineveh. Babylon survived, and information concerning Assyria was doubtless coloured by Babylonian prejudices. The effacement of Nineveh seems to have been one of the miracles of history. It may well be that Assyria had used potential coins without recognising the significance of coinage, and

the national disaster may have swept the remembrance of their achievement from men's minds.

Granting, however, for the sake of argument, that we are not entitled to demur to the statement that the Lydians were the first to use coins, we may object that it actually implies the use of coin in Assyria. Further, we may doubt whether it really denies the existence of what we should certainly admit to be coins. The Assyrian and Babylonian documents may also have something to say on the point that will seriously modify the sense in which we are to take the assertion.

Let us consider all that is implied in the Lydian use of coin. It is admitted that they adopted two standards—one to suit their eastern trade with Mesopotamia, the other for the western trade with the coast of Asia Minor. Their coins then admittedly reached the markets of Babylonia. There could be no other reason for adopting a double standard than the certainty that coins, acceptable in the Greek cities of Asia Minor, would be disapproved of in Mesopotamia. The date of this invention has been placed as early as the eighth century B.C. Nineveh was dominant till near the end of the seventh century. These Lydian coins could not have been current in Babylonia without being well known in Assyria also. Suppose, however, we bring down the date of the invention to a period subsequent to the fall of Nineveh. It becomes doubtful whether we can then maintain the Lydian claim to priority; for Pheidon coined silver at Ægina, and, as he was reigning before the end of the seventh century, Greek coinage must have existed soon after the fall of Nineveh (c. B.C. 607).

Hence, on any supposition, the Lydian claim to priority of coinage implies the presence of Lydian coins in Babylonian markets in the early part of the sixth century. It is safe to say that no unequivocal mention of coin occurs in the innumerable Babylonian contracts and business docu-

ments of that period. They only make mention of the long-known money denominations of shekel, mina, and talent. These terms they had used unchanged for fifteen centuries. The name *dariku*, which some have tried to connect with *daric*, came into use before the Persian supremacy. It is not certain that the *dariku* was a coin at all. Later, in the fifth century, the stater appears under the form *istatiranu*.

We are therefore compelled to conclude that at one time, though the Babylonians were using coins, they gave them no special name. The coins were purposely made of a size and weight to suit Babylonian standards. They were spoken of by the old names belonging to the ancient bullion weights that had preceded them as money. If the new money had been of distinct weight and value from the old shekels and minas, prices could not have been intelligibly stated without naming those coins.

This conclusion carries with it other consequences. If we admit that when coins first came into use the same names were applied to them as had been given to their uncoined equivalents, then no evidence of such introduction need be looked for in the statement of prices. If such an invention as coinage had been native, and taken place by gradual changes in the use of masses of metal, of definite size and shape, stamped with a denomination and some characteristic mark or device, then the evidence of these changes is even less likely to force itself upon us in the statement of prices. When a shekel ingot was first stamped with a mark of quality or value, it was still called a shekel. No one step in the process of evolution of coin from uncoined money calls for a new name. It is possible, however, that the device on a coin will at length win for it a new name. Thus coins stamped with the head of an ox will be called "oxen" in time. A shekel stamped with the head of an ox would, however, continue to be called a

shekel in statements of sums of money, where the addition of the amounts would involve the relation between the various denominations. If we could point to a document where so many "sheep" and "oxen" were added, and the result stated as so many "lions," we should be justified in assuming that these animals' names denoted coins, and that the coin stamped with the figure of a lion was a higher denomination than the "sheep" or "ox." If, however, the "sheep" or "ox" coin was admittedly only a coined shekel, the old sign would still be used to denote it. These signs are ideograms, like our £ s. d. The name for a "sovereign" might become a "George," in deference to its device; but we should not discard £ as its sign in our bills.

That this accurately expresses the state of affairs in Assyria is not easily proved. The Assyrians have left us no treatise on their currency, nor even a schoolboy's arithmetic. Yet alongside the almost invariable expression of sums of money by the old signs that had done duty when money was simple bullion, we have indications that the money had acquired names which are suggestive of coin devices. It seems impossible otherwise to explain the addition of the word *purimê*, literally "wild asses," to a sum of minas of bronze. Were these really living animals, part of the purchase money, or its accepted equivalent, the price must have been differently stated. Thus "twenty minas of bronze in lieu of x. *purimê*," or "twenty minas of bronze together with x. *purimê*," would permit us to imagine living animals, x. of which would be taken as equivalent to twenty minas of bronze, or as part of the price. Such equivalent alternatives and compound prices do occur stated in this manner. On the other hand, "twenty minas of bronze *purimê*" can only mean that *purimê* was a name for a mina of bronze. The absence of a numeral before *purimê* is decisive. Either as an alterna-

tive price, or as an addition to it, the number of wild asses could not have been left vague and undetermined. I purposely leave out of question here the nature of the animal and its possible Lydian origin, because I shall discuss it technically elsewhere. An early Lydian coin device is a running animal said to be "a fox"; early Greek coins also show "a hare." The Assyrian ideogram merely demands "an animal of the plain." The argument is untouched by these details. It is highly improbable that a mina of bronze could bear an animal name, save from a coin device. If this is admitted, the Assyrians used coins. It is not proved that these were of native mints. This example does not stand alone. There is some evidence, less conclusive but plausible, that another coin bore the device of a "sheep."

As a rule, however, to the latest hour of their independent existence, the Assyrians used, in the statement of prices, the old signs for shekel, mina and talent, which equally well expressed the weights of bullion in those moneys. We know how rudimentary the early Lydian coins were. If, on their introduction to Assyrian markets, they marked but a small advance on the money already in use and made no change in value, they called for no distinctive name. It was quite otherwise with a foreign money like the mina of Carchemish, whose weight was about half that of the native Assyrian mina. No statement of price could be accurate which intended Carchemish minas without naming them. Even then the name mina persists. That no new name was given does not prove the absence of a coin device, but merely that the Carchemish mina became known to Assyrian traders before it bore any such device. The adoption of a coin device would not at once lead to a new name. In the statement of prices a device name would take long to appear. The old reckonings and signs would persistently remain.

The arguments hitherto used reach further still. If we cannot expect to find documentary evidence of coined money even when it was certainly in use, no valid argument can be built on the absence of terms, unequivocally denoting coined money, from the Assyrian documents. It is certain that Gyges, king of Lydia, entered into friendly relations with Assyria before the end of the seventh century. If this did not introduce a foreign coinage into Assyria, there is not yet any proof that Assyria did not already use coins. The borrowing may be on the Lydian side. Nothing compelled the Assyrian scribes to advertise the fact that they used coins, unless coinage had altered the weights of the shekel, mina or talent in use before.

The Assyrians certainly used separate pieces of metal of uniform weight, if not of uniform size, as money. For it is the usage of the scribes not to employ the sign of the plural after the signs for weights and measures, unless the amount is to be considered as consisting of separate pieces; just as we distinguish between our use of the words "pence" and "pennies." Now all through the Assyrian documents we find sums expressed as so many shekels, without the plural sign when regard is had to the amount merely; but also very often with the plural sign, involving the existence of separate shekel pieces. That goes a long way to show that separate shekel pieces were used, and that the silver was not merely weighed out as bullion. It shows that shekel pieces were counted, though it does not show they were coined. It is, however, quite consistent with their being coined. On the other hand, the very conspicuous absence of a plural sign after the signs for minas of silver makes it probable that no such large piece of silver as the mina was separately used. Numbers of shekels may have made up each mina; or ingots of various weights may still have been used for larger sums of silver. The plural sign is, however, quite usual after minas of bronze. These may

have already become coins of a sort ; at any rate, separate bronze mina pieces are fairly certain.

Whatever difference is really marked by the employment of the plural sign after the signs for money values concerns the shekel of silver and the mina of bronze alone. It is not fair, however, to insist that separate silver mina pieces were not in use. If they actually were as much in use as separate silver shekels, the use of the plural sign for the shekels only may imply more than their mere separateness ; it may silently serve to mark the fact that they were already coins. In what sense could they be coins ? Separate ingots or blocks of metal, stamped with their value or weight, we may hesitate to call coins. Probably Herodotus would not recognise such as coins. On the other hand, Assyrian scribes, having been accustomed to such money, would probably not regard the introduction of more distinctly coin-shaped money as a change calling for a fresh nomenclature. Values would not be changed ; they were not writing about coins, whether they used them or not, only recording prices. Even were coins in use and distinctly named colloquially, prices would be stated in the old terms. When centuries later coins of a different value and name came into use, they were duly named.

It now seems appropriate to examine the evidence for the shape of the money pieces. We know that the precious metals were cast into ingots, and have some idea of their shape. We read of *libnâti*, literally "bricks" of gold ; the shape of these ingots admits of no doubt. We read of *lišânê*, literally "tongues." Never do we read of these ingots being used as money. We may argue, with some show of reason, that at any rate the money pieces were not of these shapes. Even if they were, it only needed the impress of a stamp to make them rudimentary coins ; if they were circular or oval cakes of metal so stamped, what more do we want ?

The use of stamps for impressing an inscription on a brick had been known for centuries. Incised inscriptions on weights are in our museums. The use of seal impressions on documents proves the possession of the artistic skill necessary to produce the device for a coin. The seals were usually stone, but their impression in clay would serve for a mould. Such clay moulds are known to have been used for later coinage in Greece. The Assyrians, however, also cut inscriptions on metal. The early Lydiã coins were clearly impressed by a stamp. Further, the connection between coin and seal devices is very close. The designs on the early Persian coins are very like the royal seal device used for some century or more by the Assyrian kings. Is it too much to suppose that when the Persians conquered Assyria that very royal seal fell into their hands and was used by them as the heirs of the old rulers? If so, and their coin device was copied from it, what is to prevent our believing that the same use had been made before by Assyria?

We know that Lydia coined money before the fall of Nineveh or soon after. If the intercourse between the nations was too slight to admit of a rapid spread of the invention, we may turn in another direction and note the probable state of affairs there. The land of the Hittites certainly possessed all the means necessary for the production of coins. The so-called "boss" of Tarkondemos bears an incuse inscription in both Hittite and cuneiform characters as well as a royal figure. If it had weighed an exact number of shekels, or had borne a number indicating its value, we must have admitted it to be a coin. Of course its date precedes the fall of the Hittite empire. Now Carchemish, itself a Hittite capital, played a very important part in Assyrian commerce. This city lost its political independence in B.C. 717, and became absorbed in the Assyrian Empire. Yet its standard shekel and mina continued in use

to the end of the seventh century. Had those shekels and minas been mere bullion, it is passing strange they should not have been reweighed, as such, in Assyrian scales. If, as seems certain, the Carchemish mina weighed just half an ordinary Assyrian one, it would surely have passed in Assyria as a half-mina; or, if not exactly that, would have been treated in bulk as bullion. The only thing that was likely to prevent this treatment would be some distinguishing mark declaring it to be a mina. If then the Carchemish money was stamped with its value, we are very near to coins.

A little further consideration will make it still more likely that the Carchemish money was a rudimentary coin. In the Assyrian deeds and documents of the seventh century B.C., Carchemish minas are continually named. If these transactions had been between Assyrian traders on the one side and Carchemish merchants on the other, one could understand it, but between Assyrians it seems hard to understand why they should use Carchemish minas when they had their own. Even where foreign coins are used largely it is because they bear an easily ascertained relation to native standards, or have some superior monetary value, as in the case of English sovereigns on the Continent. Even then one would be surprised at two Frenchmen contracting to pay in English money. On the other hand, if Assyrian money was mere bullion, and Carchemish money coined, a good cause for the custom is seen at once. We have seen above that if Assyria had coin, it was probably not a silver mina; hence perhaps the preference for the Carchemish silver mina. If this was coined, it would be preferred to the Assyrian bullion mina, although its difference in value made it incapable of quite displacing it.

Having set out at some length, and with some pains to avoid technical arguments, the considerations which go to suggest the use of coins in Assyria, I must glance at the

negative evidence against this view. Hitherto nothing that can be called an Assyrian coin has come to Europe. So far as it goes that sounds damaging. But it goes a very little way indeed. I need not say that one good example of an Assyrian coin would destroy it all; for as long as the one example is to seek, its force remains. In any case it proves too much. Whatever be thought of the above arguments, they absolutely prove the use of separate money pieces, either in bars or cakes, if not coins. Yet no such shekel or mina bar is producible. The reason is not hard to find. Assyria as a whole has not been widely explored. Nineveh and Kalah, Khorsabad and a few other places have yielded much. Yet in each place it was the palace that was explored, or the temple. Now of all places the palace or the temple would be most thoroughly plundered. Private dwelling-houses may yet preserve their small hoards, but a treasury would be easily found. Buried treasure is the mania of the Oriental; no great mound probably remains that has not been ransacked for ages, if it was not stripped almost immediately after its formation.

How thoroughly the Assyrian palaces have been swept of all precious metals may be judged from the very small amount of gold and silver in the Assyrian antiquities of our museums. The cupidity of the native diggers was doubtless a factor in the result. They could not secrete colossi, but coins. We cannot doubt that the palaces of Nineveh were stored with all manner of gold and silver vessels. What value would be attached to an argument from their absence from our museums?

It may not be without weight that the later names for Jewish and Syrian moneys are suggestive of Assyrian rather than Greek or Persian origin. The mina is certainly of Assyrian origin, and the shekel also. The *parsu* or half-mina, the *zusa* or drachma, are also suggestive of Assyria. The usual Syriac word for the coin called *στανήρ* by the

Greeks is, as Professor Jensen pointed out to me, hardly derived from the Greek. It more probably represents a coin once called an Ishtar. Such a coin, bearing as its device the head of Ištar of Nineveh, is very likely meant by the often-named *rešê ša Ištar*; literally, "heads of Ishtar."

It seems, therefore, somewhat hazardous to rely on the often-repeated assertion that Lydia was the first to use coin. That Herodotus meant this is doubtful; and while a real coin of unquestioned Assyrian coinage alone could put the matter beyond doubt, we may await its discovery with considerable confidence.

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