

Svyatoslav V. SMIRNOV* (Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow)

Notes on Timarchos' Iconography: Dioscuri Type¹

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By the middle of the II BC Seleukid kingdom widely collapsed by the constant turnover of the political forces. This long-continued process was accompanied by the territorial breakdown of the empire. Soon after the death of Antiochus IV, the throne passed to Antiochus V, his son, who was under the tutorship of the regent – so the power temporarily eluded the Seleukids. Under these circumstances, Seleukids lost their control over the peripheral zones, which caused a rapid growth of separatist activity. Among many separatists, who seceded from the Seleukids, satrap of Media Timarchos appears to be one of the most powerful. He proclaimed himself a king and established his own kingdom in Media,² During his short reign (no more than a year), Timarchos managed to capture Seleucia on the Tigris (and probably Babylonia), enter into alliance with Armenian ruler Artaxias, and even be recognized as a king by Rome. However, new Seleukid king Demetrios I launch an attack against Timarchos. As a result, rebellious satrap fell in battle and his kingdom was turned back under Seleukid control.



Fig. 1. Timarchos. Tetradrachm. Ecbatana. BM 1913,0512.1

Unfortunately, Timarchos has not received much scholarly attention and the significance of his revolt remains to some extent underestimated.³ By the conventional historiography, the figure of Timarchos is usually regarded as a usurper of lesser importance. The main reason for this approach seems to be our poor informing about Timarchos' biography and his political career. Fortunately, despite the lacks of written sources there is quite rich numismatic data, which should be deeply integrated into research. The close look at numismatic iconography could shed some light on ideological and political claims of Timarchos and bring us closer to understanding of the phenomenon of his revolt. The aim of this note is to analyze the 'Dioscuri motif' displayed on Timarchos' coins in an attempt to develop the ideological basis of the relations between Timarchos and Greco-Bactrian ruler Eukratides.

* Institute of World History; SmirnovSV3@yandex.ru

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² *Iust. Prol.* 34.

³ For actual study above all the following works are important: BELLINGER (1945) 37-44; LE RIDER (1964) 318-319; LE RIDER (1965); HOUGHTON (1979) 213-217; BERNARD (1985) 111-113; KNEPPE (1989); EHLING (2008) 124-130; COLORU (2009) 219-223.

The ‘Dioscuri’ coinage issued by Timarchos is quite rare. In fact, there are only several tetradrachms known. The main reason for such a rarity is that fact that many of them were repressed or melted down by Demetrios I soon after his victory. The obverse of these coins is portrayed by helmeted head of a ruler, while the reverse displays an image of Dioscuri-riders holding the spears and riding to the right.⁴ The legend clearly attributes these coins to king Timarchos.⁵

Even at first sight, it becomes clear that this iconography is not typical for the Seleukids. The displaying of the helmeted portrait of a ruler was unusual both for the Seleukid and Timarchos’ coinage as well. Except very few cases, as an obverse type of Seleukid coins served a diademed portrait of king.

The ‘Dioscuri motif’ was occasionally displayed on the Seleukid coins. However, the images of Dioscuri as riders are not found on the Seleukid coins until the middle of the II BC. More often, we can come across jugate portraits of Dioscuri or some of their attributes: hats and stars.⁶ Anyhow, the significance of the Dioscuri coinage is not the lack of correspondence with Seleukid iconography. The iconography of this type is surprisingly identical to the famous coin type of Greco-Bactrian king Eukratides with only two easily visible dissimilarities: the obverse bears the portrait of Timarchos, while the reverse shows the legend with his name.⁷



Fig. 2. Eukratides. Tetradrachm. SMB Nr. 18200224

Such a stylistic similarity caused hot scholar debates concerning the nature of the relations between two rulers. As a starting point was taken that very fact that this iconographic similarity could not be just a coincidence. Bearing this in mind, we can presume the existence of a kind of political relations between Timarchos and Eukratides. Timarchos, whose power did not seem quite strong, paid a lot of attention to propaganda. Doing so, he undoubtedly should have focused on the coin iconography, which became a matter of a special interest.

It is important to note that many scholars conventionally regarded this iconographic similarity as a reason for an alliance between two rulers, although there are two general views on what exactly was the reason to make it. For M. Olbrycht, this coalition could have been a means against activity of Parthian king Mithradates I, who ‘must have worried about the prospects of war on two fronts and took the initiative

⁴ SC 1588–1589.

⁵ The legend includes the title the ‘great king’, but we would like to leave beyond this paper the study on titulature. See: ENGELS (2014) 333-362; STROOTMAN (in press).

⁶ SC 753; GAIBOV (2015) 384-402.

⁷ BOPEARACHCHI (1991), pl. 17. Ser. 6. See also: FLEISCHER (1990) 34-35.

to eliminate external threats on both fronts'.⁸ The Parthian menace appeared to be so serious for independence of both rulers that eventually led both of them to alliance. The political situation in the Hellenistic East in the middle of the II BC makes this point hypothetically possible. However, from other hand, there is no ground to assume that the main reason for this alliance was only the increasing of Parthian menace. Due to the lack of the information given by our sources, this suggestion remains to some extent speculative because the key reasoning is the *argumentum e silentio*.

Other scholars put the stress on the economic reasons. One of the most carefully argued opinion was proposed by P. Bernard.⁹ He supposed that Timarchos' Dioscuri coinage was no more than an imitation, which studied his own economic interests. The main reason for this imitation was the prevalence of Eukratides' coins and its popularity, which at the time Timarchos seized the power already became a widely recognizable brand. There are dozens of coin hoards, which contain coins of Dioscuri type. Circulating over vast area, these coins reached as east far as India and as west far as Bosporan kingdom. Thus, Timarchos could have profited this popularity by issuing the coins of closer iconography. Nevertheless, what is most significant is that for Bearnard, there was an imitation of design without any ideological connotation. Consequentially, Timarchos should have not attached attention to the semantic and ideological sense of the imagery he employed on his coins. This last idea appears to conflict with common understanding of coin iconography as a powerful ideological weapon. However, P. Bernard left this nuance without attention. He eventually pointed out that by adopting the 'Dioscuri type' Timarchos just attempted to break with the Seleukid ideological traditions.¹⁰ All in all, P. Bernard not excluding the possibility that the alliance between Timarchos and Eukratides could have potentially taken place, emphasized that if the alliance was made, there was not need to represent it by the iconography.



Fig. 3. Timarchos. Tetradrachm. Seleucia on the Tigris. (obverse). From: FLEISCHER R. (1990)

The hypothesis proposed by P. Bernard is plausible, however, some arguments seem to be groundless. Thus, it was almost impossible for Timarchos to break with the Seleukid ideological traditions. The iconography of his coins clearly demonstrate close linking with Seleukid imagery. There are, for instance, some coin series, issued in the name of Timarchos, which represent famous Seleukid coin type 'Apollo, sitting on omphalos'. Undoubtedly, we cannot be sure whether we are dealing here with the following Seleukid iconography or adoption more general Near Eastern tradition.¹¹ At any case, the style and design of the Timarchos' Apollo coinage has a firm Seleukid background. But even taking this argument into

⁸ OLBRYCHT (2010) 230-238. See also: TARN (1951) 218; LE RIDER (1965) 333; KNEPPE (1989) 45-46; EHLING (2008) 127-129; COLOROU (2009) 222-223.

⁹ BERNARD (1985) 111.

¹⁰ For O. Coloru, this alliance had both the political and economic reasons. Thus, as one of the principal reasons, Coloru provides the interregional trade that was about to tumble because of the increasing of Parthian menace.

¹¹ ERICKSON (2011) 51-66; IOSSIF (2011) 229-291.

account, it is not completely clear what was the reason – economy or ideology?¹² Following Bernard's suggestion, it must therefore be accepted that Timarchos should have duplicated Eukratides' coin type as similar as possible to the original. In this way, the semantic of the imagery would have been for him nothing but only 'ring hollow', what is a hard to believe. From other hand, getting down to the details it becomes clear that there are many stylistic differences between 'Dioscuri iconography' of Timarchos' and Eukratides' coinage.

The 'Dioscuri' coinage was issued at least by two mints: Ecbatana and Seleucia on the Tigris. The coins from Ecbatana replicate (except for some emblems) Eukratides' iconography, while the output of Seleucia has some visible peculiarities.



Fig. 4. A seal from Seleucia on the Tigris. Timarchos (?). From: Seleucia al Tigri (2004)

Firstly is the portrait, which, in terms of physiognomy, shows some individual traits. There is no doubts that the Timarchos portrayed himself in a specific manner so that his portrait was markedly different from that one of Eukratides'. Another dissimilarity is the ends of diadem. A. Houghton pointed out that on the coins struck by the mint of Seleucia, one diadem end flies up behind, while the other falls forward over shoulder.¹³ It is remarkable that the coins produced by the min of Ecbatana likewise all coins of Eukratides, king's portrait shows diadem ends falling behind. There are also some differences between the helmets. On the coins from Ecbatana is displayed the version of Beotic helmet that must be fully in the line with Bactrian art. At the same time, the iconography of the coins from Seleucia shows the Beotic helmet traits. To summarize, it

¹² KNEPPE (1989) 45-46.

¹³ HOUGHTON (1979) 213-217.

is worth noting that the portrait of Timarchos displayed on Seleucia coinage is characterized by some stylistic peculiarities, which differ it from the portrait of Eukratides.

All mentioned stylistic differences could lead us to the conclusion that for Timarchos' coinage the helmeted portrait was something more than a meaningless duplicate. On the contrary, this art element should have been of a great importance for his ideology. It would not be mistaken even to suppose that the helmeted portrait could have been somehow connected with the military nature of his power. Undoubtedly, Eukratides was more likely the first ruler, who introduced the coin type in question. However, the helmeted portrait of the ruler itself was an archaic symbol of a virtue and bravery, i.e. the symbol of a king-warrior.¹⁴

The seals can probably give us more about helmet symbolism in Timarchos' iconography. In 1960–1970 Italian archeologists discovered a giant archive of seal impressions derived from Seleucia on the Tigris. Among the hundreds of the various portraits of the rulers, preserved on the seal impressions, there are only three, which carry the portrait of a ruler in Beotic helmet.¹⁵

Unfortunately, the physiognomic features do not allow us to identify its owner accurately, but the helmet iconography means the symbolic importance of the helmet. According to numismatic iconography, only Timarchos employed the helmeted portrait on his coins.¹⁶

And yet, all presented conclusions seem somewhat speculative. Indeed, the numismatic data is hardly able to offer the conclusive evidence for existing of the alliance between Timarchos with Eukratides. Nevertheless, for us, there are some facts, which could provide evidence of this coalition. Actually, these rulers had a lot in common: both of them were usurpers and took the power illegally. This circumstance could have formed a common ideological basis.

The origin of Timarchos seems to play a significant role. It is well known that Greeks from Ionia, and the natives of Miletus, had firm relations with the region of Central Asia at least until the eastern provinces of the Seleucid kingdom fell under the power of Parthians. It also must be noted the possible role of Parthia as a menace for both Greco-Bactria and Media. Unfortunately, our sources say nothing about Mithradates' invasions of Media before 140 BC, but we cannot exclude such possibility. The failing of the Seleucid power in the East, should have attracted the attention of Parthian king to take initiative and to levy war on Median usurper. It is also hardly possible to imagine, on the one hand, that Mithradates passed up the occasion to compete for power in Media, and, on the other, that Eukratides, who fought against Mithradates for some years, lost the opportunity to make an anti-Parthian coalition.

In our opinion, the existence of the alliance between Timarchos and Eukratides could be more demonstratively justified by the semantic of Dioscuri motif. P. Bernard supposed that the Dioscuri as a dualistic symbol symbolized two brothers Timarchos and Herakleidos, but we know nothing about the relation between brothers after Timarchos became a king. The cult of Dioscuri was one of the archaic in the Indo-European mythology. Gods-brother were worshipped as protectors of horsemen, travellers and warriors. This cult was popular among the Indo-Iranians. One of the main elements of this cult was the concept of dualism and dualistic power as well. In the political sense, the Dioscuri were a symbol of political dualism, or in other words a partnership. This is why the cult of Dioscuri was so popular in ancient Sparta, where the system of the dual kingship was practiced. The depicting of Dioscuri on the Seleucid coins and seals could have reflected the system of co-regency.¹⁷ Sometimes the jugate portrait of sovereigns accompanied the depiction of Dioscuri. It is also interesting that the cult of Dioscuri was practiced both in Greco-Bactria and in Miletus. Thus, the fact that the image of Dioscuri, holding the palm branches – the symbol of the victory, was chosen as a main coin type for the dominant reverse type, could be interpreted as an evidence for the alliance made between Timarchos and Eukratides.

¹⁴ See also Eukratides' imitations coinage struck in Chorasmia – MITCHINER (1975) type Nr. 497; and Diomedes coinage of this motif – BOPEARACHCHI (1993) pl. 45, Ser. 5.

¹⁵ Seleucia al Tigri (2004) 44-46.

¹⁶ FLEISCHER (1991) 59.

¹⁷ GAIBOV (2015) 384-402.

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Summary

Notes on Timarchos' Iconography: Dioscuri Type

The paper deals with the iconography of Timarchos' 'Dioscuri coinage'. The remarkable feature of these coins is that this coin type is nearly to be identical to that one of Greco-Bactrian king Eukratides I. The analysis of the stylistics shows the peculiar way of Timarchos' iconography. Additionally, the 'Dioscuri motif' could have stressed the partnership between two rulers.

Keywords: Seleukids, Timarchos, iconography, Hellenism, Dioscuri, numismatics