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The three-quarter facing heads in Hellenistic Carian coinage: a sign of submission?

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Rhodes and Helios in three-quarter

Issued since the foundation of the city in 408 BC and dominant until the beginning of the plinthophoric coinage in the 180s BC, the three-quarter facing Rhodes Helios became intrinsically tied to the image of the city, as the rose which often accompanied him in the reverse (ASHTON 2001). Throughout these centuries, specially during the Hellenistic ones, the costal Carian region fluctuated in the Rhodian orbit, with varying degrees of dependency. At the same time, several Carian communities also issued coins with three-quarter facing heads. Intuitively, they have been interpreted as a direct sign of political, economical and cultural submission of these communities to Rhodes or imbedded in the interpretation itself of these coinages in catalogues as simply Helios. But are these representations unequivocally that of the Rhodian Helios?

Obv of a Mausolus’ tetradrachm
377/6 – 353/2 BC
FRBNF41794837

The Hecatomnid tradition

The facing head motif in the obverse of coins had a long tradition in Greek coinage. The most well-known of this production is theArethusa coinage of Syracuse, which established an important western Greek tradition of facing heads (ERHART 1979, 181 – 194). But mainland Caria also developed its own facing heads, specifically in a three-quarter perspective. The Hecatomnid dynasty of Carian satraps was important in this tradition, beginning with Mausolus (377/6 – 353/52 BC), producing coinages bearing a three-quarter facing Apollo, with a chlamys and a laurel, in the obverse (KONUK 2013). Centered in Halicarnassus, they had a growing dominion through the Carian continent and adjacent islands, especially in the second third of the 4th century BC. But Halicarnassus already produced three-quarter facing heads of the god in the 4th century, even before it was a satrapal capital.

Obv of a Rhodian didrachm
C. 230 – 205 BC
FRBNF41779955

Cnidus: Helios or Apollo?

Cnidus switched its archaic and classical Aphrodite coinage to the types of Artemis and Apollo in the mid 3rd century BC, all in profile. Then, the city changed the obverse of its coinage again, but to a Rhodian-Helios-like three-quarter head. This, together with other testomomies, traditionally lead some scholars to infer a Rhodian domination of Cnidus in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC (FRASER & BEAN 1954, 93 – 94). But this argument was criticized after some decades, Cnidus most probably being a free city (REGGER 1999, 89). The three-quarter head’s identification as Helios was also challenged, Jan Nordba identifying it as Apollo (1986, 54) despite the absence of his traditional attributes. This is partly due to the city’s prior adoption of the Apollo coinage and the importance of the god in the city’s cultic life (Herodotus 1.144).

Obv of a Cnidian didrachm
C. 210 – 185 BC
FRBNF41778666

Cos: Helios or Heracles?

Cos also started minting, apart from its traditional Heracles in profile (both bearded and beardless), occasional facing head emissions. First, by c. 250 - 240 BC, the city adopted a three-quarter head wearing Heracles’ main attribute and identifier in its coinage: the lion skin. The lions’ mane substitutes Helios’ flowing locks. Decades after, in c. 220 - 190 BC, the city also produced coins without the lion skin, approaching the Rhodian Helios iconography. Cos’ coinage play with Helios’ representation, with both an approximation and a withdraw from it.

Obv of a Cosian drachm
C. 250 – 240 BC
FRBNF41779789

Hellenistic Halicarnassus: old or new references?

Halicarnassus experienced a long time of domination from the Hecatomnids to the Ptolemies. During the first of these, the city was the center of the power and emissions of the three-quarter Apollo, as mentioned above. But a new series of facing heads appeared in 2nd-1st century BC, after the retreat of the Ptolemies’ naval power in the Aegean. Would this coinage be a sign of a new period of external control over Halicarnassus, this time under Rhodes? Or a reaffirmation of its past coinage, when it was the Hecatomnid capital or even before? As in the Cnidian case, the absence of the laurel doesn’t permit an unequivocal identification. But it could, as the cases of Cnidus and Cos, play with the polysemic and sometimes ambiguous identifications of the gods in a polytheistic context (for ambiguity as a communication strategy in numismatics, see ROWAN 2016).

Obv of a Halicarnassian drachm
2nd – 1st century BC
FRBNF41779950


