

FLAME Regional Bias Series: Greater Syria

AUTHOR: JANE SANCINITO (UMASS LOWELL)

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Geographic boundaries

The territory of Greater Syria is bound by the coast of the Mediterranean Sea to the west. Determining its northern, southern, and especially its eastern borders through the Roman, Byzantine, and eventually, Islamic periods is more challenging as few topographical markers are available for immediate reference. The region was also subdivided into a number of smaller administrative units that shifted, especially as the eastern border was disputed by the Sasanian Empire and the later Caliphates.

To the north, the Roman provinces were bounded by the borders of Cappadocia and Cilicia, but were more flexible to the northeast, where the territory of Mesopotamia was contested. By the late 4th century, these territories were seen to be part of Syria, or at least of a greater Orient under Byzantine control. The territory always extended as far north as the capital city of Antioch, though it often did not extend much further into Asia Minor.

Southern Syria was defined by its border with Egypt, which lay along the Mediterranean coastline. Greater Syria generally included the Sinai peninsula, though it was more commonly



Fig. 1: Rough borders of Greater Syria, whose boundaries in antiquity were dynamic.

identified as being one of the Palestines or as "Arabia." In the south, the Arabian desert, east of Palmyra, formed a natural border, at least until the Islamic conquest, after which point the territory was more open to transit from the southeast.

The eastern border was the most flexible and changed constantly throughout the period. The *limes* were established with fortifications, though the southeast was more rarely contested by the Romans, Byzantines, or Sasanians than Mesopotamia and Armenia to the north. These conflicts surged in 4th and 6th centuries and reached a peak in the early 7th century with the total conquest of the region by the Sasanians, followed by the swift conquest by Islamic forces. After the Sasanian conquest, Syria's eastern boundaries were fundamentally rearranged as it was integrated into new empires in the 7th and 8th centuries.

Ancient numismatic context

With the exception of a short period in the mid-4th century, when *siliqua* and *miliarenses* were produced, Syria issued exclusively gold and bronze coinage through this period. The mint of Antioch was the only site of production through the Roman and early Byzantine period, and it struck Constantinian *solidi* and a variety of AE types up until the reform of Anastasius. A full range of bronze was struck from that point on, from the rarely preserved *nummus* through to the common 40 *nummi* coin.

The last attested product of the Antioch mint was from the early 7th century, after which point minting in the city ceased and was dispersed throughout the province. A series of smaller mints appear after 645 CE, some striking imitations of the Byzantine 40 *nummi* or Arab-Byzantine coinage, and others striking the Islamic *fals*. The primary Islamic mint was established in Damascus in the late 7th century and it struck a full trimetallic system of coinage, including the gold *dinar*, silver *dirham*, and bronze *fals*.

Within the province, most coinage came from local mints, with a heavy preponderance of external coins coming from Constantinople and Thessalonika. Antiochene coins of the Roman and Byzantine periods have been found throughout the Balkans and are known from a large number of British finds. This is perhaps due more to the strength of modern data, rather than actual economic integration in antiquity (owing largely to the Portable Antiquities Scheme, which has publicized British finds very effectively). These coins are mostly from the 4th century, and of higher denomination, as might be expected. The relative weakness of ties between Syria and Egypt is also worth noting. Syrian coins found in Egypt tend to be early bronzes, as the Anastasian reform perpetuated the tradition of incompatible denominations between the two provinces and appears to have succeeded in making the two economically distinct.

There is little evidence of economic integration with the east prior to the Sasanian conquest, though the period immediately following produced a number of hybrid and imitation coins that suggest an era of monetary experimentation and accommodation before the full transition to an Islamic monetary system.

Coin Find Context

Numismatic evidence from Syria begins with a number of large excavations from the early 20th century. Among these are the important sites of Antioch and Jerash in the first wave of expeditions in the 1920s. This work was undertaken under the auspices of the French mandate in the region, which also authorized the relocation of local populations to facilitate archaeological work, as at the site of Palmyra/Tadmor. This control, and associated excavation, was interrupted by the Second World War, leading to the suspension of many digs. Archaeological work was rejuvenated in the 1950s, which saw renewed work at older sites and new work at sites like Tiberias, Caesarea Maritima, and Damascus. The publication of these sites provided the backbone of the major catalogues and corpora of Syrian coinage, though little emphasis was placed on Arab-Byzantine or early Islamic coinage from the region.

Since the 1990s, support for excavation and publication has been extremely uneven in the region. Coin finds have primarily arisen as the result of archaeological work overseen by the Israel Antiquities Authority, and especially through the publication efforts of its numismatic curator Dr. Gabriela Bijovsky and Daniel Ariel, who has given particular attention to late Roman and Byzantine materials. Systematic archaeological work, like that at Bet She'an, has been supplemented by emergency excavations throughout Israel and a number of coin hoard finds, which have been made quickly and easily available. Despite the importance of the region in late antiquity, Israeli finds are overly represented in our data. The FLAME database is already heavily skewed by the ready availability of this information and will likely become more so as further coin finds are added.

The rest of the region lags behind Israel in the publication of Roman and Byzantine-era coins, though there has been substantial excavation work. Excavations in modern Syria, prior to the outbreak of civil war in 2011, were generally focused on pre-Roman sites, thus limiting its usefulness to FLAME, and while multiple Jordanian projects have recently been sponsored at Petra, including excavations that were facilitated by the lack of tourists during the COVID-19 pandemic, publication of much of this work is still pending. In Lebanon, excavations at Sarepta, Tyre, and Beirut have produced much late Roman and early Medieval material and have been published by Kevin Butcher, Ziad Sawaya, and Georges Abou Diwan. Sadly, and despite substantial work by

archaeologists in the region, many of the excavations in Lebanon have not yet been published, making it difficult to determine the extent to which the finds we have are representative of the whole.

There are relatively few comprehensive publications that offer introductory reading on the late Roman and early Byzantine period in Syria, as most publications are focused on single finds or excavations or are, by now, woefully out of date. Currently, the most comprehensive offering is Bijovsky 2012. The Arab-Byzantine coinage has fared somewhat better, with Oddy 2004 offering some helpful reflections on the state of scholarship. This work is especially useful when taken in conjunction with the updates of Pottier 2008 and 2010.

Work cited

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