Some New Coins of Vologases V

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During the last 50 years of the Parthian dynasty, roughly AD 170–220, the major concern of the ruling Arsacids lay in fending off the unwelcome attentions of Rome. In a sense, the Romans were always looking for a replay of the battle of Carrhae which they lost so disastrously; emperors such as Trajan and Aurelius could be sure of public support at home whether they led invading armies in person or sent deputies like Verus. After the assassination of Commodus in AD 190, the succession was in dispute. Eventually the winner was Severus who, asserting that there had been Parthian help for one of his rivals, brought the legions once again into Mesopotamia, sacking the Arsacid capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon in AD 197.

The prince who bore the brunt of this offensive was Vologases V. From his dated tetradrachms we know that his reign in Seleucia, where this denomination was struck, extended from AD 191 to 207. Initially, the coins depict a facing bust, which may indicate an Atropatenean origin; such issues are very rare, the only published examples being in the BM trays, their dates being approximately August 191 and January 192. Subsequently, Vologases adopted the normal profile bust for examples dating between uncertain months in 192 and 207/8. In both portraits the monarch has the exaggerated bountiful hair-style found earlier on the coinage of Oesoe I (c. AD 109–129) and afterwards to characterise the images of the Sasanian princes.

On the plateau of Iran with its major (perhaps sole) mint of Ecbatana there circulated drachms of the facing bust type, but they are not dated and so cannot directly assist in establishing the chronology. These coins are also rare (though not so rare as the larger denomination) and their attribution is secure because the inscription on them includes in Aramaic the name of Vologases. Hitherto, no drachmas of this ruler with the profile bust have come to light. It may be that the military situation in Mesopotamia, where a build-up of forces to resist the impending conflict with Rome would have taken place, permitted on the plateau the rise of a usurper, striking very common drachms with the name Oesoe (II), but no tetradrachms.

A small group of profile bust drachms has now appeared, thus completing the issues of Vologases V. At first glance they might be taken to be an aberrant issue of Oesoe I, but on the reverse we have once again "Vologases" in Aramaic, so there can be no doubt of the allocation to the later prince. Furthermore, they reportedly formed part of a much larger hoard mainly of drachms of Vologases VI, whose dated coinage runs from 207 to 227.

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