

A PARTHIAN COIN-LEGEND ON A CHINESE BRONZE

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In 1913, Chêng Wên-ch'ò 鄭文焯 published in the Shanghai art journal, *Shên-chou ta kuan* 神州大觀, a rubbing from a small inscribed bronze in his collection (Figs. 1 and 2) and his comments on it. The piece had been in the possession of Chêng's family for almost a hundred years. Where it originally came from, he did not know. What it was, none of the scholars he asked could tell him. In a poem that he dedicated to Li Hung-chang in 1896, Chêng called the script on the bronze "Latin". He was, as we shall see, not so very far from the truth.

Chêng died in 1918.¹ The piece which Mrs. William Mayer purchased in Peking in the early thirties (Figs. 3 and 4) is probably the one that was in his collection. It is, down to the smallest details, identical with the bronze illustrated in the *Shên-chou ta kuan*. Other pieces like it exist. One of them, similar but for slight differences in the inscription, is in the Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology in Toronto. Bishop Ch. W. White, who obtained it in Kaifengfu, Honan, was told that it had been found at Loyang.² Another one, or perhaps this same piece, was published by the art dealer Huo Ming-chih (Paul Houo Ming-tse) 霍明志 in his *Preuves des antiquités de Chine* (Peking 1930). He declared that it came from Ho-chou in Kansu. In 1928, Baron Staël-Holstein showed Paul Pelliot the photo of a piece which looked like the one Huo offered for sale two years later.³

That so shortly after Chêng's death no less than five similar pieces⁴ should have been found is more than unlikely. The bronze once in the Chêng Collection was evidently copied, and the copies were sold with the usual stories.

I cannot be sure that the Mayer bronze is actually the one which the Chêng family had for three generations. It may be a copy, but if so it is an exact copy, and can take for all archaeological investigations, especially for a study of the inscription, the place of the original.

The piece is of cast bronze, circular and slightly convex. It has a diameter of 40 mm. The thickness varies from 5 to 8 mm. owing to the irregularity of the relief. The convex side (Figs. 1 and 3) shows a dragon in relief, the style of which places the bronze in the later Han period, or the period of the Three Kingdoms at the latest. Aesthetically, the piece is

rather mediocre and would deserve little notice if it were not for the inscription in relief on the concave side (Figs. 2 and 4).

At the first glance the inscription looks like a meaningless combination of strokes, something rather intended to convey the impression of an inscription than a sequence of words composed of real characters. On closer examination, however, and against what one would expect to find on a Chinese bronze, the band turns out to consist of Greek letters. Some of them are well traced; others seem to be misunderstood and more or less distorted; while a few others are too debased to allow of identification. But even if one substitutes for them all possible letters for which they could stand, the line resists all attempts to read it.

It might be assumed that the Chinese artist played arbitrarily with what he had seen somewhere, be it a manuscript, or an inscription on a vessel, or a coin-legend, dissecting words which were "Greek to him" and putting the parts together as the fancy led him. However, it is equally conceivable, and in fact more probable, that he just copied more or less faithfully something that was already badly blundered. The small number of different characters is in favour of the latter assumption. If the Greek text, whatever it was and however short it may have been, were written correctly, it must have contained more than the nine different forms occurring in the inscription. It seems that the Chinese copied a barbaric, very degraded Greek.

The reduction of the number of letters is characteristic for the late stages in the barbarization which Greek writing underwent in the Near East. "Non raro scriptum I pro A, E, P, Φ, atque una eademque nota quinque literarum potentiam sortita est", already complained Joseph Eckhel, the father of modern numismatics.⁵

The form of the letters in our inscription is not the Greek cursive as we know it from the Kushano-Sasanian coins, which suggest themselves at once as possibly having furnished the original. It is rather the script used on Parthian and Bactrian coins. In fact, on Parthian coins legends are found which our inscription resembles more closely than anything else known from the vast, partly Hellenized regions west of China. They show the same forms of letters combined in the same seemingly meaningless way as on our bronze.

While the legends on the Parthian tetradrachms are, on the whole, satisfactory, on the drachms debased forms and blundered legends made their appearance as early as the middle of the second century B.C. "Blunders and barbarities increased with each succeeding reign. It is evident that before the end of the first century B.C. the engravers of the drachms were, for the most part, ignorant of the Greek language. With the appearance of a legend in Pehlevi alongside the barbarous Greek in the second half of the first century A.D., one understands that the western characters had



Fig. 2

A Parthian Coin-Legend

Fig. 1

become only a part of a meaningless design."⁶ J. de Morgan, who in 1912 wrote the *Étude sur la décadence de l'écriture grecque dans l'empire Perse sous les Arsacides*,⁷ later became so disgusted with the *jambages sans signification* that he did not even discuss them in his *Numismatique de la Perse antique*.⁸

Parthian coins were well known to the Chinese. Chang Ch'ien, or whoever wrote the report that goes under his name, knew that the Parthians used to change the portrait of the ruler on the coins as soon as a new king ascended the throne.⁹ Many Parthian coins must surely be buried in the sands of Chinese Turkestan, brought there, as well as to China proper, by merchants carrying on the lively trade between the Han empire and the kingdom of the Arsacides. It was the same in later times. Under the Pei Chou, gold and silver coins of the Western regions circulated widely in north-western China.¹⁰

Our inscription seems to be a blundered copy of a blundered rendering of the coin legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ.

For convenience I have divided the inscription into five parts, as shown on Fig. 2. Besides the general resemblance, it was the sequence of letters in Part IV (Fig. 2) which led me to compare the bronze with Parthian drachms. I thought I could recognize in it the word ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ. On the drachms of Gotarzes II (c. A.D. 38-51) ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ is written ΕΠΙ+ΑΝΟΥΣ and :ΠΙ+ΑΝΟΥΣ.¹¹ While there the word is still legible, the letters on the issues of the second, and still more of the third century, degenerated to such an extent that it would be utterly impossible to "read" anything were there not a continuous series ranging from the normal, or almost normal, orthography of the Gotarzes drachms down to the barbarisms of the issues of Artavasdes.¹² The forms are:¹³

1. ΕΠΙ+ΑΝΟΥΣ	11. <ΧΛΟΥ
2. :ΠΙ+ΑΝΟΥΣ	12. ΧΛΙΑΥ
3. ΙΠΙ+ΑΝΟΥΣ	13. <ΧΛΙ
4. ΕΠΙΧΑΙΩ	14. <Χ ΙΙΑΙ
5. ΠΙ+ΛΙΟΥΣ	15. <ΧΛΙΑ
6. ΠΙ+ΑΝΟΥΣ	16. <Χ ΙΛΩ
7. ΕΠΙΧΛ Ω Σ	17. -ΧΛΙΑΩ
8. ΙΠΙ+ΛΙΟΥΣ	18. ΠΧΛΙΑΙΩ
9. ΠΠΓΙΧΑΗΟΥΣ	19. ΠΧΛΩΩ
10. Π ΧΛΙΟΥ	20. <ΧΛΑΙ

Already under Pacorus II (78-115) Φ is occasionally written Χ. This letter, Χ,¹⁴ is the only one that occurs in all the later legends, even the most degraded ones. It is preceded by ΕΠΙ, ΠΠΠ, :ΠΙ, ΙΠΙ, ΠΙ, Π, <, -. In our inscription we find ΠΧ = ΠΙΧ. ΑΝ after Φ (= Χ) appears as ΙΙΑ (12, 15, 17), ΙΙ (13), and ΙΙΑΙ (18). Our inscription has ΙΙΑΙ. ΟΥΣ has the forms

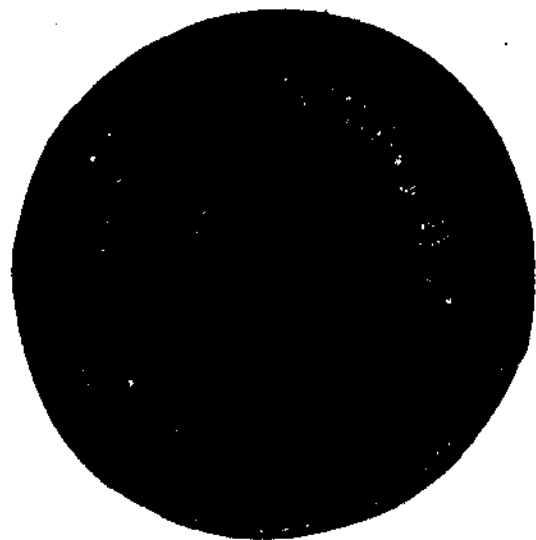


Fig. 4

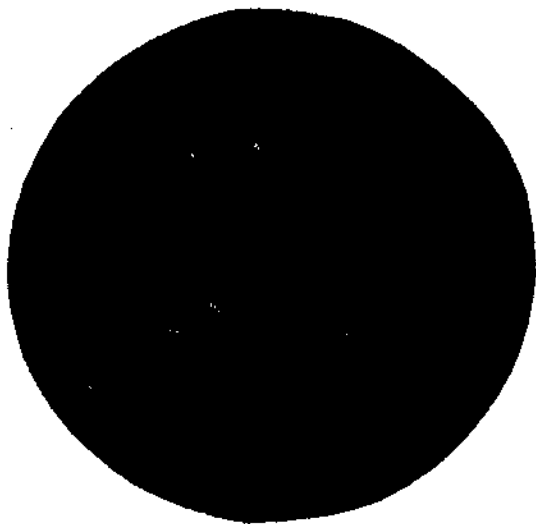


Fig. 3

A Parthian Coin-Legend

□VC (1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 9), □C (7), and □□ (19). □□ appears on the bronze as □. The sequence ΠΧΙΛΙ□ is thus to be read *ΠΙΧΑΝ□□ = ΕΠΙΧΑΝΟVC = ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥC.

On the drachms from the later coinage of Orodes II until Artavasdes, with the exception of the issues of Vonones I and one issue of Gotarzes II, ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥC is followed by ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟC. One should, therefore, expect the next word to be ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟC.

From about A.D. 130 on, the initial X (= Φ) in ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟC is frequently preceded by a meaningless letter, usually T or V.¹⁵ Our bronze (Fig. 2, Part V) has VX. The form Π stands obviously for IV as in +IV:ΛΛΗΧ□□ = ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟC on drachms of Vologases I.¹⁶ The following letter is blundered in a blundered word. It cannot be a distorted I or I. But since E in ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟC occurs also as 7 and H,¹⁷ and since H and B on the drachms from Orodes II to Vardanes I are very similar,¹⁸ Δ is probably H as in the legends on the drachms of Pacorus II.¹⁹ V is the "normal" upside down form of Λ.²⁰ The next Λ appears in the correct form. I know of no legend in which V stands for H. The following X is again the normal form of N in ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟC as written in the later legends.²¹ It is the last letter of the word. Σ is, after A.D. 130, altogether missing. ΟC began to disappear already under Pacorus II. VX is, as so often, only a duplication of the preceding two letters.

It seems to me that we may interpret VXΠΔΒΛΛVXVX as *VXIVHΛΛVX [VX] = ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟC.

The words ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥC ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟC occur in coin legends of various length, ranging from six to ten words. It is obvious that the few letters between VX, the last letters of ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟC and Π, the first of ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥC, cannot represent more than three, or, at the most, four words. The short legends on the drachms after Gotarzes II consist of a Greek part: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩC ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥC ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟC and, towards the end of Arsacid times, a Pahlavi part: the ruler's name and title, which displace ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩC.

The Pahlavi part is very rarely, and then only slightly, blundered. It certainly does not appear on our inscription. The letters stand, therefore, for three or four of the words ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩC ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ.

The seated bowman is so distinct, even on the meanest drachms, that a craftsman unable to read the legend would still place it upright in copying it. If we imagine how a Chinese would read the legend, we would expect him to begin with the lines above the picture: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩC ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ, continuing with that on the right: ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ; he would then read the lines on the left: ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥC ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟC, and finally those in the exergue: ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ. Since, especially in the later issues, the two lines in the exergue are very often off the flan, owing to the practice of using flans

of insufficient size, the words preceding ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥC are likely to be ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩC ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ.

In the sequence of characters which, if our assumption is right, should stand for those three words, the combination ΔI appears twice. It could be the beginning of ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩC and ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ. The inscription has first ΔΙΠΛV (Fig. 2, Part I). Δ is B. A is missing, as, e.g., on the drachms of Artavasdes.²² On the later issues one of the four letters ΣΙΑΕ in ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩC is frequently omitted.²³ ΣΙΑΕ itself has the forms ΙΙΑΕ, ΙΙΑΙ, ΙΙΑΗ.²⁴ So ΙΠV on our bronze is probably ΙΑΙ = ΙΑΕ.²⁵ The following V is Ω in the form it has in ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩC ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ on numerous drachms.²⁶ The final Σ is missing as almost always in the later issues.

ΔΙΛVΔI (Fig. 2, Part II) seems to stand for ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ. A is again omitted. I is C. VV is very probably ΙΑΙ as above, ΔI would then be ΔI, which is the form of Ω on many drachms from Pacorus II to Artavasdes.²⁷ The objection that one and the same letter, in this case Ω, cannot appear in two different forms, V and ΔI, would be valid if we had to do with correct legends. However, even on tetradrachms a letter has sometimes no less than three different forms in one and the same legend.²⁸ In view of legends blundered beyond recognition like ΔVΔVIVA ΔV VΔVΔ, one is almost grateful to the engraver that he left at least a few characters intact.

There remains Part III. It should stand for ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ. ΑΡC has the forms ΑII and <II.²⁹ ΔI, which, as we have seen, stands for ΩV and ΔI could very well also stand for <II. AK appears quite often as ΑΑ.³⁰ Our bronze has ΑΑ. The following character is evidently ΩV as in ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥC, cf. ΩV and ΩV in *ΑρσάκΩV.³¹

The first of the following lines is the inscription on the bronze; the second, the tentatively reconstructed original; the third, the proposed correct reading.

Δ ΙΠΛV Δ ΙΛVΔI ΔIΔI ΠΙΧΙΛΙΔI VXVΔVΔVXVX
 *B ΙΑIV B ΙΙΑΙ ΔI <IIAΔI ΠΙΧΙΝ□□ ΤΧΙVΗΑΑ? X
 ΒασίλεωC Βασίλεων Αρσακού επιφανούC φιλελληνοC

The *terminus ante quem* for the copied legend would be the second half of the second century A.D., when the Pahlavi legends appear alongside the Greek.

NOTES

¹ He is remembered mainly as a writer of tz'u. A Chinese bannerman, Chêng was born in Peking in 1853 and became chü-jên in 1875. He retired from office in the nineties and settled near Suchow where his collected works (*Ta-ho-shan-fung ch'üan-shu* 大鶴山房全書) were published between 1896 and 1915. After the revolution of 1911, his circumstances were reduced and he had to make his living from practising medicine and selling pictures (v. biographies in *Pei-chuan-chi pu* 碑傳集補 53, 7b-11a).

¹ Miss Helen E. Fernald, Keeper of the East Asiatic collection in the Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology, in a letter to me (April 5, 1950).

² Paul Pelliot in *T'oung-pao*, 1932, p. 194.

³ In a letter dated June 15, 1950, Professor Richard N. Frye, Harvard University, informed me that he knew of six pieces.

⁴ *Doctrina numorum veterum* 3, 542.

⁵ R. H. McDowell, *Coins from Seleucia on the Tigris*, Ann Arbor, 1935, p. 166.

⁶ *Revue Archéologique*, 1912, 1-31.

⁷ In: E. Babelon, *Traité des Monnaies Grecques et Romaines* 3.1 (Paris, 1927). Hereafter referred to as Morgan.

⁸ *Shih-chi*, ch. 123, trans. J. J. M. de Groot, *Chinesische Urkunden zur Geschichte Asiens*, Berlin, 1926, II, 17.

⁹ *Sui-shu*, ch. 24, quoted by Kuwabara Jitsuzō, *Zui-Tō jidai Shina ni rajū shita Sai-ikijin ni tsuite 隋唐時代支那に來住した西域人に就いて*, *Mélanges Naitō*, 608.

¹⁰ W. Wroth, *Catalogue of the Coins of Parthia in the British Museum*, London, 1903, p. 165, n. 2. Hereafter referred to as Wroth.

¹¹ Where the links are missing, as *e.g.*, in Khwarizm, the legends are often unintelligible, *cf.* S. P. Tolstov, *Monety shukhov drevnego Khorezmu*, *Vestnik drevnei istorii*, 4(5), 1938, p. 127.

¹² 1: Wroth 161; 2: Wroth 162; 3: Wroth 186; 4-7: Wroth 195, Morgan 315, A. Markov, *Neizdannyya Arsakidskiiia monety*, *Zapiski vostochnago otd. Russk. arkh-eolog. obshchestva* 6, 1891, p. 288; 8: Wroth 205; 9: Markov 289; 10: Wroth 219; 11-12: Wroth 230; 13-14: Wroth 239; 15: Wroth 243; 16-19: Wroth 247; 20: Wroth 251.

¹³ or +.

¹⁴ *E.g.*, Wroth 219, 230; S. W. Grose, *Catalogue of the McClean Collection of Greek Coins*, Cambridge, 1929, III, No. 9669.

¹⁵ Morgan 309.

¹⁶ Markov 288, 289.

¹⁷ Morgan 174.

¹⁸ Markov pl. 3, 22.

¹⁹ Even on tetradrachms.

²⁰ Wroth 126, 156, 165.

²¹ Wroth 251.

²² Wroth 195, 239, 247; Grose No. 9635; G. Macdonald, *Catalogue of Greek Coins in the Hunterian Collection*, Glasgow, 1905, III, 348.

²³ Wroth 186, 195, 201, 205, 213, 217, 219, 230, 243; Morgan 309; Grose No. 9666, 9674.

²⁴ Al→N is quite common.

²⁵ *E.g.*, Wroth 195, 201, 205, 213, etc.

²⁶ Morgan 174.

²⁷ Morgan 286.

²⁸ Morgan 311; Wroth 230.

²⁹ Wroth 253.

³⁰ Wroth 195; Morgan 309, 311, 315, 323, 329.