From Gadara to Tall Knedij (Mesopotamia)

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A new coin find from Tall Knedij in the north Khabur valley (Syria) sheds light on the relationship between Gadara in the Decapolis (Jordan) and settlements in the Roman eastern military border zone.

Tall Knedij lies about 20 km south of Hassake on the western bank of the Khabur. Since 1993 a German mission of the Vorderasiatisches Museum Berlin under the direction of Evelyn Klengel-Brand and Lutz Martin has been excavating the site, which was settled - with interruptions - from the 3rd Millenium BC to the 13th Century. AD. In the 1st Century BC Tall Knedij formed a small village within the classical region of Mesopotamia. Its ancient name is unknown. The Parthian-Roman burial no. 77 was comparatively rich, and produced a lot of artifacts. On one of the left ribs of the corpse a corroded copper coin was discovered (fig. 1a, b). In spite of its very poor preservation the identification of the coin was successful. It was minted at Gadara in the Decapolis between 47 and 39 BC. On the obverse the bust of Tyche facing to the right is visible and on the reverse a cornucopiae and inscription (SNG-ANS 6, no. 1287-1290).

Fig. 1a: City coin of Gadara found on Tall Knedij.

Fig. 1b: Another specimen of the same type in better state of preservation.

Fig. 2: The circulation area of the city coinage of Gadara and the military roads of northern Syria/Mesopotamia.
Copper coins were civic coinages destined only for local circulation. The recent find belongs to a restricted circulation area in northern Palestine and Arabia, but Tall Knedlij is about 700 km from Gadara, its place of origin (fig. 2).

A possible interpretation of a “local” coin travelling so far can be achieved by a comparison with finds of “foreign” coins in the region of Galilee, Samaria and the Decapolis.

There are very few, and they always come from the same places, such as Alexandria in Egypt and the urban centres situated on the important military roads in northern Syria and northern Mesopotamia, like Antioch, Hierapolis, Zeugma, Carrhae (Harran), and Edessa (ar-Ruha, Urfa). Therefore the connection between the cities of the Decapolis and those in northern Mesopotamia primarily had not an economic but a military character.

From the Decapolis the road led via Damascus and Palmyra to the north and east, and connected the garrisons of Bostra and the Syrian desert border with the military camps in northern Mesopotamia.

So the coin from Gadara in Tall Knedlij is a counterpart of the occasional imported coin of northern Syrian and Mesopotamian origin into the region of the Decapolis. It reflects the movements of soldiers or military units between the Phoenician and Arabian cities in the south and the cities and villages in the north-east on the Roman-Parthian border.
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CONTENTS

- Late Roman Belt Buckles 2
- Qanawat 3
- Words of Appreciation to Dr. Hans-Dieter Blenert 6
- Welcome to Dr. Roland Lamprichs 7
- Fellows in residence 8
- Farewell to Mr. Achilles 9
- Resafa (Syria) 9
- Digital terrain models examples 12
- Celebrating the Amman Institute 13
- The Jordan Valley Village Project 15
- The Biblical Archaeological Institute of Wuppertal 18
- Finnish Jabal Harun Project 2000 19
- Early Neolithic Göbekli Tepe 21
- Al-Bassah Cave near Iraq al-Amir 23
- Conference: Fifth Millenium of the Invention of Writing 24
- Tell Khanasir Cave Sounding 25
- From Gadara to Tall Knedij 26