

OZeAN

Online Zeitschrift zur Antiken Numismatik



Issue 5 (2023), pp. 1–7

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DOI [10.17879/ozean-2023-4673](https://doi.org/10.17879/ozean-2023-4673)



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Herausgegeben im Auftrag der Forschungsstelle Antike Numismatik der Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität Münster
von Achim Lichtenberger, Katharina Martin und Ulrich Werz

ozean-numismatik.de / ISSN 2690-4490

Mit Unterstützung der Numismatischen Kommission der Länder in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland

Six Unpublished Nabataean Drachms: Filling some Gaps

Alexander Kaplun and Eby G. Friedman

Abstract: Six hitherto unknown dated Nabataean drachms from the reigns of Aretas IV, Malichus II, and Rabbel II are described in this article. The existence of these coins tightens some of the temporal gaps in the dated silver coinage of this period. Insight into the scarcity of silver within the Nabataean kingdom during this period is demonstrated. Suggestions as to yet undiscovered dated drachms are also made.

Key Words: Numismatics, Nabataean coinage, [Aretas IV](#), [Malichus II](#), [Rabbel II](#)

Zusammenfassung: Sechs bisher unbekannte nabatäische Drachmen aus der Regierungszeit von Aretas IV., Malichus II. und Rabbel II. werden in diesem Artikel vorgestellt. Die jeweils datierten Münzen schließen einige der zeitlichen Lücken in der Silberprägung dieser Zeit. Einblick in die Silberknappheit im nabatäischen Königreich während dieser Periode wird gegeben. Für bislang (noch) nicht nachgewiesene datierte Drachmen lassen sich Vermutungen aufstellen.

Schlagwörter: Numismatik, nabatäische Münzprägung, Aretas IV., Malichus II., Rabbel II.

Late Nabataean silver drachms were produced during the reigns of Aretas IV, his son Malichus II, and his son, Rabbel II. Upon the Roman conquest of 106 CE, Nabataean coinage came to an end. For most of this period, ranging from 9 BCE to 106 CE, small silver drachms were produced, becoming the standard commercial coinage of the kingdom. The weight of these drachms ranges from almost 3 to 4.5 grams with a decreasing silver content of approximately 80 to 50%. Several comprehensive studies dedicated to Nabataean coins have been published over the past two years, greatly enhancing the basis set by Ya'akov Meshorer in his Ph.D. thesis published in 1975¹. Meshorer, recently updated by Rachel Barkay² and Younis Al-Qatanani³, described the known set of dated silver drachms during the reign of these three kings. The majority of the Nabataean silver coins is dated, providing a unique insight into the complex and dynamic history of this desert kingdom. During this period of nearly a century, drachms were produced almost every year. However, certain years silver coins were not minted or at least not (yet) discovered based on our current understanding of the existing known coinage. The intention of this article is to fill some of these

temporal gaps with hitherto unknown dated coins, proving the production of silver drachms for six more years, all during the first century common era (CE), 13/14, 31/32, 53/54, 83/84, 84/85 and 87/88. We also confirm existence of drachms dated 32/33 and 100/101.

Coins

1. Aretas IV, Year 22, 13/14 CE, AR Drachm, 16 mm, 4.22 g, 1 h (fig. 1)

Obv.: Bust of Aretas IV r. laureate, with curls flowing down from the side of his forehead and reaching his shoulders, the lower part of each lock twisted into a vertical coil. He wears a mantle with a V-shaped collar and decoration on the shoulders; around from r. below: חרתת מלך – נבטו רחם עמה («Aretas king of the Nabataeans who loves his people»), in the field, r.: n

¹ Meshorer 1975.

² Barkay 2019.

³ Al-Qatanani 2020.



Fig. 1: Aretas IV, Year 22, 13/14 CE

Rev: Bust of Huldu r., laureate, draped and veiled, with a curl on the cheek; around from r. below:

שנת 22 – מלכת נבטו – חלדו (»Huldu queen of the Nabataeans, year 22«); in field r.: ח

Until recently no silver coins dated to the regional years 18 to 25 of the Aretas IV period were known⁴. During the years 22 and 24 silvered (or plated) coins with a bronze core mimicking regular silver coinage were minted⁵. These silvered coins suggest that no standard silver coins were minted during this period, probably due to a shortage of silver⁶ since the silvered coins would have driven silver coins out of circulation (Gresham's law). A silver drachm dated year 21 from the Uri Aka-Mizrahi collection was however recently published⁷. The coin pictured in **fig. 1** is similar in style to the Aka-Mizrahi coin; in fact, the present coin is so similar to the coin of Aka-Mizrahi that it is tempting to assume that the dies were produced by the same engraver. Interestingly, both of these coins are quite different from the bronze core coins dated year 22.

We do not currently know whether the silver and silvered coins were simultaneously produced or whether minting of the silver drachms stopped sometime during year 22 and was completely replaced by silvered coins. This issue remains an open question until additional silver or silvered drachms of this period come to light. In any case, the scarcity of year 21 and 22 silver drachms suggests low production volume.

2. Aretas IV, Year 40, 31/32 CE, AR Drachm, 14 mm, 3.04 g, 12 h (fig. 2)

Obv.: Bust of Aretas IV r. with long wavy hair, combed down from the forehead, with



Fig. 2: Aretas IV, Year 40, 31/32 CE

⁴ Barkay 2019, p. 48.

⁵ Barkay 2019, p. 113 types 145–146.

⁶ Barkay 2019, p. 50.

⁷ Hoover 2020, coin 134; Barkay 2020, p. 140 Add. 26.



horizontal stripes at the back; he wears a mantle with a V-shaped opening decorated with two rows of beads and tassels on the shoulders; moustache; around from r. below:

חרתת מלך [נבטו] – רחם עמה

(»Aretas king of the Nabataeans who loves his people«). No letter in the field.

Rev.: Jugate head of Aretas laureate and bust of Shuqilat r., draped; around from r. below:

שקו[לת מלכת – נבטו] שנת 33

(»Shuqilat queen of the Nabataeans, year 40«). The figure »40« is incomplete. No letter in the field.

Aretas IV drachms dated year 40 have not previously been reported. The upper parts of the numerals in the date of the illustrated coin are off flan, but the space just after the second »20« of the date is clearly empty. No additional numeral could fit into this space.

3. Aretas IV, Year 41, 32/33 CE, AR Drachm, 14 mm, 3.76 g, 1 h (fig. 3)

Obv.: Bust of Aretas IV r. with long wavy hair, combed down from the forehead, with horizontal stripes at the back; he wears a mantle with a V-shaped opening decorated with two rows of beads and tassels on the shoulders; moustache; around from r. below:

[חרתת מלך [נבטו] – רחם עמה]

Rev.: Jugate head of Aretas laureate and bust of Shuqilat r., draped; around from r. below:

שקו[לת מלכת – נבטו] שנת 33

(»Shuqilat queen of the Nabataeans, year 41«). Only traces of the numeral are preserved.

This type, shown in **fig. 3**, has been described by Meshorer⁸ based on earlier publications; however, Barkay was not able to locate the two coins referred to by Meshorer. Barkay therefore kept this type in her comprehensive work⁹



Fig. 3: Aretas IV, Year 41, 32/33 CE

and marked the coin type as not yet confirmed¹⁰. The coin shown in **fig. 3** is well centered but the die is too large for the flan to accommodate the complete legend. This situation is quite typical for late Nabataean drachms; however, the lower part of the numerals of the date remain clear. Two »20« numerals are readily identifiable, while the last numeral of the date, positioned right after the second »20« clearly includes one straight vertical line, suggesting a »1«. No additional parallel lines are visible, so the year cannot be »2« or »3«. The line is straight and not curved, so the date cannot contain a »5«. The last alternative would be »4«, in which one of the lines forming an X is off flan. The line on the illustrated coin is, however, strictly vertical, not typical for a »4« during this period and not observed on existing drachms of the year 44 available for review. We suggest that

⁸ Meshorer 1975, p. 104 no. 107.

⁹ Barkay 2019, p. 118 no. 178.

¹⁰ Barkay 2019, p. 61 note 5.





Fig. 4: Malichus II, Year 14, 53/54 CE

the coin depicted in **fig. 3** is indeed dated year 41. The existence of this type and year is thus no longer in question.

4. Malichus II, Year 14, 53/54 CE, AR Drachm, 15 mm, 4.36 g, 11 h (fig. 4)

Obv.: Draped and laureate bust of Malichus II r., with long hair and probably a moustache; around from r. below: **מלכו מלכא מלך - נבטון שנת** («Malichus the king, king of the Nabataeans», with date «Year 14»). The figure **14** is quite clear.

Rev.: Draped bust of Shuqilat II r., veiled; around, from r. below: **שקילת אחתה - מלכת נבטון** («Shuqilat, his sister, queen of the Nabataeans»)

The coin has an unusual ovoid shape.

The presence of the word **אחתה** («sister») shows that the coin belongs to King Malichus II and not to Aretas IV whose second wife had the same name. Silver coins of Malichus II are significantly scarcer than those of his father Aretas IV¹¹. Some of the years and types are known from only one example¹². The coin shown in **fig. 4** is well worn; however, the date is quite clear. With reporting of this coin, the number of missing years of Malichus' rule for which no drachms are known is lowered to just four: years 2, 3, 4, and 12¹³. It is quite likely that coins of these years will eventually be discovered. The most likely date to be discovered appears to be year 12.



Fig. 5A: Rabbel II, Year 14, 83/84 CE

5a. Rabbel II, Year 14, 83/84 CE, AR Drachm, 13.5 mm, 3.24 g, 12 h (fig. 5A)

Obv.: Bust of Rabbel II r., laureate, long hair; Around from l.: **נבטון שנת** («Nabataeans, Year 14»).

The name of King Rabbel is off the flan.

¹¹ Barkay 2014.

¹² Barkay 2019, p. 63.

¹³ Barkay 2020, p. 143.



Rev.: Veiled and draped bust of Gamilat r.;
around, from r.: גמלת אחתה («Gamilat
his sister»)

**5b. Rabbel II, Year 14, 83/84 CE, AR Drachm,
13.5 mm, 3.51 g, 12 h (fig. 5B)**

Obv.: Bust of Rabbel II r., laureate, long hair;
around from l.: נבטו שנת (X^)
(«Nabataeans, Year 14»). The name of
King Rabbel is off the flan.

Rev.: Veiled and draped bust of Gamilat r.;
around, from r.: [גמלת] («Gamilat»)



Fig. 5B: Rabbel II, Year 14, 83/84 CE

**6. Rabbel II, Year 15, 84/85 CE, AR Drachm,
3.3 g, 15 mm (fig. 6)**

Obv.: Draped bust of Rabbel II r., laureate,
wearing V-shaped mantle. Around from
r.: [רבאל] («Rabbel»); on l.: שנת (S^)
(«Year 15»).
The name Rabbel is off center.

Rev.: Veiled and draped bust of Gamilat r.;
around, from r.: גמ[לת אחתה מלכ]ת נבטו
(«Gamilat his sister»).



Fig. 6: Rabbel II, Year 15, 84/85 CE

**7. Rabbel II, Year 18, 87/88 CE, AR Drachm,
2.8 g, 14 mm (fig. 7)**

Obv.: Draped bust of Rabbel II r., laureate,
long hair; wearing V-shaped mantle.
Around from r.: רבאל («Rabbel»); on l.:
||| S^ («[Year] 18»). The name Rabbel
is vague.

Rev.: Veiled and draped bust of Gamilat r.;
around, from r.: גמלת אחתה («Gamilat
his sister»). The name of Queen Gamilat
is vague, but sufficient to identify the
coin.



Fig. 7: Rabbel II, Year 18, 87/88 CE





Fig. 8: Rabbel II, Year 31, 100/101 CE

8. Rabbel II, Year 31, 100/101 CE, AR Drachm, 3.46 g, 13 mm, 1 h (fig. 8)

Obv.: Draped bust of Rabbel II r., laureate, long curly hair down to his shoulders; crude style; wearing V-shaped mantle closed in front and ornamented with beads. Around from l.: 𐤌𐤓𐤃 (Year 31). The name of Rabbel is faintly indicated.
 Rev.: Draped bust of Queen Gamilat; around, from r. below: 𐤂𐤌𐤓𐤁 [גמילת אחת] («Gamilat his sister») and traces of additional letters.

The date of the coins illustrated in **figs. 5, 6** and **7** is clear, while the date of the coin pictured in **fig. 8** is less certain. However, a comparison with previously published coins reveals that this drachm was struck with the same obverse die as Al-Qatanani 242¹⁴, attributed to year 31. Discovery of a second example confirms the date proposed by Al-Qatanani. Moreover, yet a third drachm bearing this date was auctioned several years ago. This additio-

nal drachm was struck with different dies and has an even more confidently readable date¹⁵.

The coins depicted in **figs. 5, 6, 7** and **8** contribute to our knowledge of the evolution of minting during the rule of the last Nabataean king. Until now, drachms minted during only fourteen out of thirty-five years of Rabbel II's reign were known¹⁶. While it is not very likely that drachms from all thirty-five years will eventually be discovered, we can now add four more years/types to our knowledge of the minting during the rule of the last Nabataean king. Years 14, 15, and 18 can now be added to the stretch of almost continuous minting from years 11 to 15 and years 17 to 22. The existence of drachms dated years 14 and 15 suggests that the production of Nabataean silver coins likely continued during year 16 as well. Moreover, a drachm attributed to year 16 has been published by Al-Qatanani¹⁷; however, the coin appears to be altered and until a better preserved example is discovered we cannot reliably fill this gap.

The existence of a year 31 drachm is historically highly important for several reasons. Numismatic evidence is one of the few sources of information we have on the Nabataean kingdom. Until now it has been assumed that during the last thirteen years of Rabbel II rule silver coins were not produced, suggesting unfavorable economic and political conditions. The fact that at least three specimens of year 31 drachms survived despite massive overstriking of Rabbel II drachms during Trajan's rule suggests that the coins were minted in significant quantity, dismissing these economic and political assumptions. The production of Nabataean silver coins after year 22 was not

¹⁴ Al-Qatanani 2020.

¹⁵ <https://cngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=355923> and <https://cngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=242452>, the same group of three coins auctioned twice. The year 31 drachm is pictured in the bottom left corner in the first link and on top in the second link.

¹⁶ Barkay 2019, p. 72.

¹⁷ Al-Qatanani 2020, type 236.



limited to just year 31. The authors also know of the existence of at least one drachm clearly dated to year 29 of Rabbel II which is also quite similar in style to the year 31 coins¹⁸. The style of all four coins is also remarkably similar to the bronze issues attributed by Rachel Barkay to the later years of Rabbel II's reign¹⁹.

Remarkably, year 31 drachms still bear the portrait of queen Gamilat, suggesting that Hagaru was the queen for no more than the four last years of the existence of the Nabataean Kingdom. Alternatively, Rabbel II could have simultaneously been married to both of his sisters, Gamilat and Hagaru. We hope that future discovery of additional dated coins will further clarify these issues.

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All coins are illustrated in original size and additionally in unscaled enlargements.

Picture credits: figs. 1, 3, 4, 6: House of Caesars & Caliphs; figs. 2, 8: D. Hendin; figs. 5A, 5B: A. Kaplun; fig. 7: Y. Al-Qatanani

¹⁸ Younis Al-Qatanani, personal communication.

¹⁹ Barkay 2019, type 236.



