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CISTOPHORI AND CISTA MYSTICA.
A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE
EARLY CISTOPHORIC TYPES (1)

The historian Livy, describing the triumphs of Quintus Minucius (190 BC), Lucius Aemilius Regillus (189 BC), and Gnaeus Manlius (187 BC), refers to the presence of great numbers of, presumably early, cistophoroi (2). He makes no mention, however, of the peculiar iconography of this coin, which was introduced by king Eumenes II of Pergamon sometime in the first half of the second century BC, and which later came to be the main currency of the Roman province of Asia. In the absence of ancient reports on the meaning of its iconography, modern scholars have adopted their own interpretation. A.X. Panel was the first scholar to identify in 1734 a specific group of silver tetradrachms of reduced weight with the cistophori mentioned by Livy, Cicero, and Festus (3). He also introduced his interpretation of this coin's iconography, which

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(2) Livy 37.46.3; 53.4-5; 39.7.1.

(3) A.X. PANEL, *De Cistophoris*, Lyon, 1734, p. 38 ff., 62, 364 ff.; F.S. KLEINER and S.P. NOE, *The Early Cistophoric Coinage*, New York, 1977, p. 10-18 (for an account of scholarship). Cf. Livy 37.46.3; 53.4-5; 39.7.1; Cicero, *Ad Alt.* 2.6.2; 2.16.4; 11.1.2; *De domo* 52.

has been universally accepted, and according to which, the cista « mystica » within a border of ivy that is represented on the obverse of the cistophori, and from which a serpent emerges left, should be associated with the cult of Sabazius ⁽⁴⁾. On the other hand, the bow-case entwined by serpents on the reverse, was plausibly considered as reference to Heracles, the legendary forefather of the Attalid dynasty (fig. 1) ⁽⁵⁾. The interpretation of the obverse seems to be based on the association of the ivy, with the Dionysiac character of Sabazius.

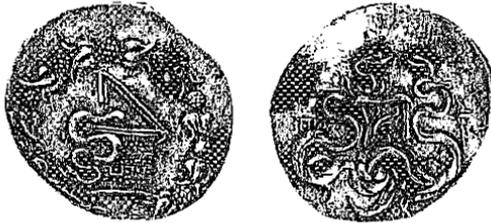


Fig. 1. Cistophoric tetradrachm - Mint of Pergamon (© Courtesy of the American Numismatic Society, New York).

To date, no scholar has challenged Panel's theory, nor has undertaken a study of the cistophoric iconography.

Numismatists tend to debate on the date for the introduction of the cistophoric coinage, without as much as acknowledging the fact that the image of a cista depicted on the cistophori is incompatible with the well-documented iconography of Sabazius ⁽⁶⁾.

(4) On the cult of Sabazius in general see: A. SCHAEFER, *Sabazius*, in *RE*, I A 11, Stuttgart, 1920, cols. 1540-1551; Ch. PICARD, *Sabazios, dieu thraco-phrygien*, in *RevArch*, 1961, p. 129-176; Th. EISELE, *Sabazios*, in *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* edited by W. S. ROSCHER, 4, Leipzig, 1914, p. 232-264; P.H. REUMERS, S.S., *De Sabazios Vereering te Athene*, Leuven, 1942.

(5) On the importance of Heracles in the Attalid mythology see; E. OHLEMTZ, *Die Kulte und Heiligtümer der Götter in Pergamon*, Darmstadt, 1968², p. 230-243; E. KOSMETATOU, *The Public and Political Image of the Attalids of Pergamon. Studies on Inscriptions, Coinage, and Monuments*, diss. University of Cincinnati, Ann Arbor, 1993, p. 70-96; EAD., *The Legend of the Hero Pergamos*, in *Ancient Society*, 25, 1995, p. 133-144.

(6) The range of dates suggested for the introduction of the early cistophoric coinage spans almost a century, from 228 to 133 BC. Cf. F.S. KLEINER-S.P. NOE, *art. cit.*, p. 10-18; G. LE RIDER, *Un groupe de cistophores de l'époque attalide*, in *Revue Numismatique*, 1978, p. 10-18.

Equally puzzling is the inexplicable and sudden preference, on the part of the Attalid kings, for a deity that was clearly only secondary to the kingdom's religious life. Additionally, the fact that the cistophoric coinage was introduced before the adoption of the cult of Sabazius by the Pergamenes, is totally overlooked. This paper will examine the evidence surrounding the iconography and cult of Sabazius and will argue that the cista on the obverse of the cistophori can not be linked to Sabazius, but should rather be associated with Athena, the patroness deity of Pergamon.

Sabazius, his Iconography, and his Cult in Pergamon

Sabazius is a well-attested Thraco-Phrygian deity known to the Greeks at least as early as the fifth century BC (7). According to legend, he was a son of Zeus and Persephone, or a son of Dionysus, his cult is epigraphically attested in Athens already in 342 BC, while we also hear that mysteries were instituted in his honour (8). Ancient authors give evidence that Sabazius was assimilated with both Zeus and Dionysus, and that even as Zeus-Sabazius, his cult had a Dionysiac character (9). The archaeological evidence suggests that his cult became very popular during the Roman period, and it is widely attested from the Near East to Great Britain (10).

Sabazius was consistently represented in art as a mature male bearded deity, standing or enthroned. He wore a long *chiton*, a helmet, or a typically Oriental high *polos*. Occasionally, he bore

lide, in *BCH*, 114, 1990, p. 683-701; R. A. BAUSLAUGH, *Cistophoric Countermarks and the Monetary of Eumenes II*, in *Numismatic Chronicle*, 150, 1990, p. 39-65; K.W. HARL *Livy and the Date of the Introduction of the Cistophoric Tetradrachma*, in *Classical Antiquity*, 10, 1991, p. 268-297; E. KOSMETATOU, *op. cit.*, p. 58-59, n. 63, where previous bibliography is cited.

(7) Cf. Aristophanes Fr. 478, in *FCGR*, Paris, 1854; *Birds*, v. 875. On the Trácian-Phrygian origins of Sabazius see also: Lucian, *Deorum Concilium* 9; *Icaromenippus*, 27; Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 196.25; 450.15; 471.18; Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 3.23.5; Origenes, *Contra Celsum*, 1.9; Clemens Alexandrinus, *Co-hortationes ad Gentes*, 13, Arnobius, *Adversus nationes*, 1.5.20.

(8) *IG II²* 1326. Cf. A. SCHAEFER, *art. cit.*, col. 1540.

(9) On Zeus-Sabazius see: Th. EISELE, *art. cit.*, col. 236-242. On Dionysus-Sabazius see: Aristophanes, *Birds*, 875; *Wasps*, 5; Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 1.9; Plutarch, *Qu. conviv.*, 4.6.2 (671F); Diodorus, 4.4.1; cf. Th. EISELE, *art. cit.*, col. 235.

(10) Ch. PICARD, *art. cit.*, p. 130-131.

wings, particularly when represented in purely Oriental style. Two fourth-century BC red-figured vases even portray him accompanied by a *thiasos* (fig. 2). To the best knowledge of this author, Sabazius did not bear any particular attributes, and does not seem to have ever been associated with a *cista mystica* or snakes ⁽¹¹⁾.



Fig. 2. Red-figured aryballos featuring Sabazius and his thiasos - London, British Museum (© Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).

The cult of Zeus-Sabazius, rather than Dionysus-Sabazius, was brought to Pergamon by queen Stratonike, presumably on the occasion of her wedding to Eumenes II, perhaps some time late in the 170's BC ⁽¹²⁾. He probably never rose above a secondary deity with his own temple and cult before 135 BC. In a well-dated letter, queen Stratonike's son Attalus III decreed the installation of Zeus-Sabazius in the temple of Athena Nikephorus, assigned the god his own cult, and appointed his relative Athenaeus as heredi-

(11) Representations on vase painting: on an *aryballos* from London and an amphora from Wien. A statuette of enthroned Sabazius belongs to the collection of Hermitage, while reliefs of the god in Oriental style are known from Berlin, Athens, and Hermitage. Cfr. Th. EISELE, *art. cit.*, col. 242-250; P.H. REUMERS, *art. cit.*, pl. 1-6.

(12) Taking into account that Stratonike's parents were married in 192 BC, she could have married Eumenes II late in the 170's BC at the earliest. Cf. Diodorus 31.19.97; Appianus, *Syriaca*, 5.

tary priest⁽¹³⁾. Interestingly, there was not going to be any syncretism with Athena, Zeus, or Dionysus.

The Cistophoric Coinage. Interpretation of its Iconography

If we take a fresh look at the iconography of the cistophori in the light of the above-discussed evidence, it should become obvious that it can not possibly be connected to Zeus-Sabazius. The presence of a « cista mystica » in connection with this deity is inexplicable, while a secondary deity like Sabazius would make a very curious choice for the obverse of the Pergamene official royal coinage. Moreover, although the exact date for the introduction of the cistophori still remains the subject of fierce debate, it would appear that it should be set some time before 181 BC. Arguing in favour of this thesis is a firmly-dated inscription which preserves a letter from Eumenes II to Artemidorus, the Attalid governor of Telmessus on the west coast of Lycia. This document provides interesting information, according to which the poll tax (*syntaxis*) was normally levied at an unorthodox annual rate of four Rhodian drachms and one obol per adult. Ashton's recent metrological study convincingly showed that this sum was equivalent to one cistophoric tetradrachm. Since Telmessus lay outside Attalid territory, and the cistophori circulated only within the Pergamene kingdom, it is logical that Eumenes II should require payment in the currency that circulated in this enclave of his domain, but which was calculated in terms of the official Pergamene currency⁽¹⁴⁾.

How can we then interpret the mythological reference of the central element of the cistophoric iconography, the so-called « cista mystica »? The association of a « cista » or basket with snakes is known in Greek art from representations of the well-known legend of Erichthonius that occupied a pivotal position in the myth and cult of Athena. This hero was considered as the son of Hephaestus by Atthis, Ge, or Athena. According to the most popular version of the myth, he was miraculously conceived, when his father attempted to rape Athena, but was only successful in ejaculating on her leg. Disgusted, the goddess wiped it off with a woolen cloth

(13) C. B. WELLES, *Royal Correspondence in the Hellenistic Period. A Study in Greek Epigraphy*, Chicago, 1974, p. 267-273, n° 67.

(14) R. ASHTON, *The Attalid Poll-Tax*, in *Num. Circ.*, May 1994, p. 159-160.

which she subsequently discarded. Erichthonius sprang from the earth, from the exact spot where the cloth had fallen ⁽¹⁵⁾. Athena promptly adopted the baby and hid him in a cist together with one, or according to another version, two snakes. She entrusted the basket to the care of the three daughters of king Kekrops of Athens, Aglaurus, Herse, and Pandrosus, and asked them not to open it. Needless to say, the Kekropides disobeyed her and brought doom upon themselves, since snakes emerged from within and either bit them to death or maddened and drove them to suicide. According to another version of the myth, Erichthonius himself was hidden in the cist after Athena transformed him into a snake ⁽¹⁶⁾.

At least one representation of the episode of the Kekropides, Erichthonius, and the snakes has survived on the pelike 1879 which was found in Kameiros, and which today belongs to the British Museum collection (fig. 3). When viewed in relationship to the iconography of Erichthonius in the Classical period, the *cista* represented on the Attalid cistophoric coinage may plausibly be interpreted as a reference to this myth and its iconographic tradition.

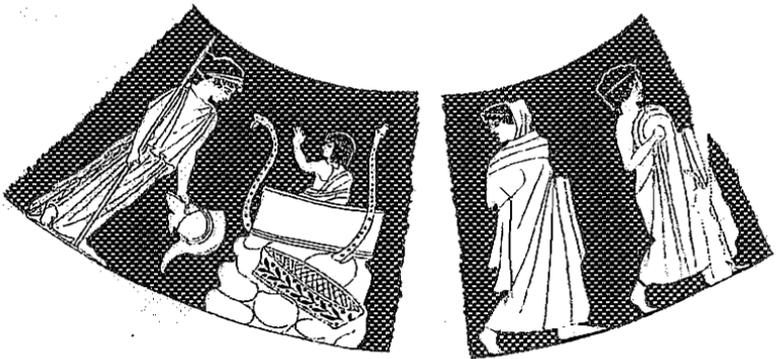


Fig. 3. Athena, Erichthonius and the Kekropides.
From red-figured pelike 1879 - London, British Museum
(© Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).

(15) Amelsagoras (5th century BC), apud Andronem Halmicarnassensem, Fr. 16 = GrGrH II 352; Apollodorus, 3.14.6; Euripides, *Ion*, v. 20; Lucian, *Philopseudes*, 3; schol. Hom. 2.547; CIG 6129B; Eratosthenes, *catasl.*, 13; Hyginus, *astr.*, 2.13.

(16) Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 2.254. Apollodorus, 3.14 mentions one snake, while Euripides, *Ion*, v. 21 mentions two. On the episode with the Kekropides, cf. Euripides, *Ion*, v. 22; Pausanias 1.18.2; Hyginus, *astr.*, 2.13.

Aesthetic considerations that were primarily directed by the available space on the coin's field, as well as an apparently conscious decision on the part of the Pergamene numismatic policy-makers to use symbols as reference to specific deities, led to the choice of the « cista mystica » as a very original reference to Athena, the city's patroness. The coin's obverse thus shows the moment just after the curious Kekropides opened the basket and discovered its deadly contents. It is obvious that those who created the cistophoric types opted for the version of Erichthonius's myth which mentions one snake rather than two, while the Pergamene artists produced an original representation of this legend rather than a faithful use of the iconography that was established in the Classical period (17).

The representation of the myth of Erichthonius on the Pergamene official royal coinage can be explained in the light of the Attalid dynasty's attachment to the cult of Athena, as well as the city of Athens. The Attalid kings repeatedly declared their piety towards their city's patroness, in honour of whom they founded a lavish sanctuary, as well as the Panhellenic festival of Nikephoria in 181 BC (18). The goddess had always been represented on the royal portrait-coins since Philetaerus founded the Pergamene state, and it is therefore plausible to assume that she should continue to be featured on the later issues. Moreover, a direct reference to the myth of Erichthonius celebrated the traditionally cordial relations between the Attalid kings and Athens, whose glorious past they had always admired and revered. In many respects, the Attalids considered Pergamon as a sort of Athens of the east: the cult of the goddess replaced that of Apollo Pasparius already during the rule of Philetaerus, while his successor Eumenes I instituted a Per-

(17) This seems to have been a standard practice of the artists who worked in Pergamon during the Attalid period. Cf. K. P. STÄHLER, *Das Unklassische im Telephosfries: die Friese des Pergamonaltars im Rahmen der hellenistischen Plastik*, Münster, 1966.

(18) C. D. WELLES, *art. cit.*, nos. 49, 62; C. P. JONES, *Diodoros Pasparios and the Nikephoria of Pergamon*, in *Chiron*, 4, 1974, p. 183-205; E. ΚΟΣΜΕΤΑΤΟΥ, *op. cit.*, p. 99-137.

gamene Panathenaic festival. Apart from the fact that Attalid princes were educated in Athens, while almost identical works of art were set up in both cities, the Pergamene kings also strived to turn Pergamon into the cultural capital of the Hellenistic world, in the same way that Athens was the cultural capital of the Classical world (19).

The representation of a « cista mystica » within a border of ivy may still puzzle. However, it has been universally accepted that the cistophoric iconography makes reference to more than one myths that comprised the Pergamene « national » mythology. In light of this data, the ivy wreath that encircles the « cista mystica » would rather be a reference to Dionysus Kathegemon, whose cult was linked to that of the dynastic cult, and which was, as a result, particularly promoted by Eumenes II. Central to this god's cult was the participation of the Dionysiac Artists, the so-called *κοινὸν τῶν περὶ τῶν Καθηγέμονα Διόνυσσον τεχνιτῶν*, as well as of the so-called *κοινὸν τῶν περὶ τῶν Ἀτταλιστῶν* (20). More over, the depiction of an ivy wreath on the cistophori served artistic considerations as well. Since the cista only covered a relatively small part of the surface of the obverse, aesthetics called for the use of a border wider than the usual circle of dots.

In conclusion then, the proposed interpretation allows the meaning of the cistophoric types to be understood as a coherent whole: following his victory against Antiochus III in 189 BC and the resulting expansion of his kingdom, king Eumenes II of Pergamon introduced a new monetary system a few years before 181 BC. The cistophori were launched as currency for use within the Attalid

(19) On the Pergamene Panathenaea, the Gallic sculptural dedications in Athens and Pergamon, as well as the copy of the Pheidian Athena Parthenos that was set up in the library of Pergamon see: IvP 18 = OGIS 267; J.J. POLLITT, *Art in the Hellenistic Age*, Cambridge, 1986, p. 79 ss.; Chr. HABICHT, *Athens and the Attalids*, in *Hesperia*, 59, 1990, p. 561-577; A. STEWART, *Greek Sculpture*, New Haven, 1990, p. 209 ss.; B.S. RIDGWAY, *Hellenistic Sculpture I: The Styles of c. 331-200 BC*, p. 275 ss.; E. KOSMETATOU, *op. cit.*, 102-104, 197-211, where previous bibliography is cited.

(20) Cf. OGIS 326; E. OHLEMUTZ, *art. cit.*, p. 90-122; C.B. WELLES, *art. cit.*, no. 53, especially p. 230-233.

kingdom. The new coins used types that celebrated the established Attalid « national » mythology: the obverse commemorates the two pillars supporting the kingdom of Pergamon, Athena, its divine patroness, and Dionysus Kathegemon, the ἀρχηγὸς τοῦ γένους, who indirectly refers to the Attalid rulers. On the other hand, the obverse of the cistophori is dedicated to Heracles, the dynasty's legendary forefather.