

## MONETA BICHARACTA—DISGNIM

IN the year 1970, during excavations at Aphrodisias in Caria, fragments of an inscription were discovered, beginning with the words: BICHARACTA MĪ [—.<sup>1</sup> The editors suggest this should be read: BICHARACTA MONETA.<sup>2</sup> The inscription may be dated to the year 301,<sup>2</sup> and is part of an edict of the Emperor Diocletian dealing with his monetary reforms. The editors further suggest that '*Bicharacta moneta*' perhaps refers to 'the new coinage of A.D. 294, created by a grand recoinage (i.e. second striking) of old pieces'.<sup>3</sup>

The word *bicharactus* appears to be a *hapax legomenon*,<sup>4</sup> and is certainly the only term thus far known to us from classical sources so to describe Diocletian's reformed currency. However, there may be yet another very similar such reference in a difficult halachic (= Jewish legal) text found in the Palestinian Talmud (= Yerushalmi) and hitherto insufficiently understood.<sup>5</sup> For in Yerushalmi Ma'aser Sheni 1. 2 we read:

If he had DISGNIM (variants: DISCNIM, LSGNIM)<sup>6</sup> coins, R. Jacob ben Zavdi in the name of Rabbi Abbahu (floruit circa 260–309)<sup>7</sup> said: He substitutes [the Second Tithe by them] at their value with the money-exchanger.<sup>8</sup> If he wished to use them (the coins) again, he substitutes them at the rate at which he [first] substituted them.

The halachic background to this text is as follows. A person who has Second-Tithe fruits has to take them to Jerusalem and eat them there. If he does not wish to take them there—it may be inconvenient for him to transport them—he may substitute them with money at the going rate. This money now takes on the legal status of the Second Tithe. When later he reaches Jerusalem with the money, he buys with it fruit, or buys fruit to the value of this money. The money now loses its Second Tithe status which in turn passes over to the fruit. Now during all these various exchanges and transactions the rule is that no loss may be incurred to the Second Tithe. With this basic information in mind we may now turn to interpreting the text before us.

In the case described here, the situation is as follows: A man has Second Tithe fruit which he wishes to substitute with certain coins called DISGNIM. We are told that he may do so, but only at their rate with the money-exchanger. From this we may deduce two facts concerning this money: (a) that there is a difference between its official rate and its market rate, and (b) that the market

<sup>1</sup> See *J.R.S.* lxi (1971), 171–7, article entitled 'Diocletian's Currency Reform: A New Inscription', by Kenan T. Erin, Joyce Reynolds, and Michael Crawford.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>4</sup> On p. 174 n. 4 the editors refer to *I.G.R.R.* iv. 595, where the word *διχάρακτος* occurs.

<sup>5</sup> For another example of a reference to Diocletian's reformed currency system in Rabbinic literature, see my article in *J.R.S.* lvi (1966), 190–5.

<sup>6</sup> DISGNIM—so in *ed. princeps* and in MS. Leiden. LSGNIM in Vatican MS. Further variants in Sirilio MS. The reading LSGNIM can best be explained by the 'dalet' and the 'yod' having joined together to look like a 'lamed'.

<sup>7</sup> R. Abbahu died in the year 309. See S. Lieberman, *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales et Slaves*, vii (1939–44), 402.

<sup>8</sup> *θερμοσάπιος*. See S. Lieberman, *Tosefta ki-fshutah*, i (New York, 1955), 26; ii. 716.

rate of these coins is *lower* than the official rate. Thus, if he substituted at the official rate, when he later came to use this money to purchase fruit in Jerusalem, he would get less for it than he had had at the outset, since its purchasing power is far lower than the official rate would suggest. This would constitute incurring a loss to the Second Tithe, and for this reason he may only substitute at the market rate. We are further told that when he comes to remove from these coins the status of Second Tithe by substituting for them fruit in Jerusalem, he must do so reckoning their value at the market rate as it was during the first substitution. Now, if these coins had gone up in value between the times of the first and second substitutions, it would be to the advantage of the Second Tithe to substitute at the later (higher) rate. For in this way he would receive *more* fruit for the Second Tithe. The tendency of the halacha is always to seek the interest, and even gain, of the Second Tithe. If R. Abbahu ruled that one must *always* reckon at the earlier rate, it follows that these coins are *always* declining in value. Hence, if he now substituted them for fruit at the present (lower) market rate, he would receive *less* fruit than he had had at the outset, and thus incur loss to the Second Tithe.

In brief, then, from this text we may infer the following situation some time between the years 260 and 309: there are coins current known as DISGNIM with a market rate lower than their official one, and whose purchasing power (i.e. value) is constantly on the decline.

Now the term DISGNIM (with its different variants listed above), a *hapax* in Rabbinic literature, has long been something of a lexical puzzle, and many suggestions have been made to explain its etymology and meaning. However, undoubtedly the most likely explanation is that which sees it as a form of the Latin *disignum* (or *disignatum*).<sup>1</sup> If such an explanation be accepted, we have in the Yerushalmi's phrase '*ma'ot shel disignim*' (literally: coins of *disignim* [type]) a precise parallel to the '*bicharacta moneta*' of the Aphrodisias inscription. *Bicharacta* is derived from the Greek, and means 'twice-stamped', while *disignim* is a (Latin) loan-word meaning exactly the same thing.

Accepting this interpretation, and adding here just one more point, namely that '*moneta bicharacta—disignim*' refers specifically to Diocletian's copper (or silver-washed)<sup>2</sup> coins, our Yerushalmi text becomes completely clear. R. Abbahu was referring to Diocletian's reformed currency. He was speaking some time after about 300, and before 309, the year of his decease. He used a

<sup>1</sup> See M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Talmud, The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (1886–1903), p. 302a, s.v., who refers one to p. 302b, s.v. DISCANS, explaining that our word is 'a popular corruption of dextans . . .'. His suggestion has no basis and is quite untenable. See further S. Krauss, *Griechische und Lateinische Lehnwörter in Talmud, Midrasch und Targum* (= *LW*), ii (Berlin, 1899), 208b, s.v. (with bibliography). See also Fleischer, *apud* J. Levy, *Neuhebräisches und Chaldäisches Wörterbuch über die Talmud und Midrasch*, i (Leipzig, 1876), 442, who writes against Levy's identification of 'disignim' with the Latin *disignum* (ibid., p. 400a, s.v.): "disignum" ("Doppelzeichen") ist in dieser Form wenigstens nicht lateinisch, da es keine

solchen Zusammensetzungen von duo mit einem Singular giebt. Vielleicht ist der Wort ein verstümmeltes *designatio*, Badenmarke mit bezeichnung der Nummer der BADEZELLE.' Krauss, *LW*, ii. 605a, s.v., also refers to 'Jost III Noten p. 183 *dua signa*, doppelgeprägt?'. See also B. Zuckermann, *Ueber Talmudische Münzen und Gewichte* (Breslau, 1862), 32–3; S. Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie*, ii (Leipzig, 1911), 410. See finally S. Lieberman, *ibid.* ii. 716 n. 29, who writes that he does not know what 'disignim' is.

<sup>2</sup> See my article in *Numismatic Chronicle* (1968), 103–9; A. Segrè, *Byzantion*, xv (1941), 249–62; J.-P. Callu, *La Politique Monétaire des Empereurs Romains* (Paris, 1969), 356–64.

term which probably came into use from an edict similar to that found in Aphrodisias, which was circulated in Palestine at that same time. Such an edict would most likely have been posted in Caesarea, the Roman administration's centre in Palestine,<sup>1</sup> and the seat of the proconsul. R. Abbahu lived in Caesarea, and was even on close terms with high officials of the administration.<sup>2</sup> No doubt he learned this term from the text<sup>3</sup> of the edict.<sup>4</sup> He knew full well that this new silver-washed coinage had been assigned an official rate which was totally unreal and overvalued, and was witness to its rapid devaluation on the open market. With a clear awareness of these factors he ruled as he did in the (by now wholly theoretical) case of the Second Tithe.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York, London, 1901), iii. 485–8, for a survey on the city of Caesarea.

<sup>2</sup> See *Jewish Encyclopedia*, i. 36, on R. Abbahu. Note that R. Abbahu knew Greek, and even taught his children Greek (*ibid.*).

<sup>3</sup> The term never gained wide circulation. Hence, it remained a *hapax* in Rabbinic literature. The fact that the Talmudic phrase has 'ma'ot shel disignim' (coins of disignim) rather than 'ma'ot disigniot' (disignim coins, the term adjectivally used), suggests that its true form and meaning was never really appreciated. Possibly we have in this word a vulgar form; hence its grammatical difficulties. (See above, p. 135, n. 1.) See further below, n. 4. See also what I have written in *Erchei* (1973), slightly modified here.

<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, it may be that the term 'disignim' was a translation of 'bicharacta' that appeared in the edict. The word was created on the pattern of the DIU (or DI) + singular (or plural) noun words, e.g. DIUPARZUF (singular) = *δυσπρόσωπος*, which also appears as DIUPARZUFIN (plural), (*LW* ii. 202a, s.v.) or DIUFRA (DUFRA, DIUFRI), (*LW* ii. 201b = 202a, s.v.), or DIUMAD(IN), (*LW* ii. 200a, s.v.). See *LW* ii. 198b, s.v. DIU. SIGNIM could, in that case be 'signum'—yod and waw are readily interchangeable—taken from the Latin *signum*, rather than the more usual (in Rabbinic Hebrew) *σίγνον* (see *LW* ii. 327b–373a, s.v. SIGNON, SGNON, *σίγνον*). If this is so, we

have DU + sing. (as above DU-PARZUF). Or, perhaps, SIGNIM was intended as an, albeit somewhat strange, plural form of the Greek *σίγνον* or the Latin *signum*, using the -im plural termination (rather than the more usual Rabbinic termination -in). In that case we have here DI + plural (as DU-PARZUFIN, see above). Either way Fleischer's queries (above, p. 135, n. 1) are answered. The combination of the Greek DU plus the Latin SIGNUM presents no difficulties, as DIU-MAD is actually a combination of the Greek DIU plus the Semitic 'AMAD to stand. However, would such a mongrel form appear in an imperial edict? And if the original Palestinian version of the edict was in Latin (*bicharacta*, as in the Aphrodisias inscription?) or in Greek (*διχάρακτος*, as in *I.G.R.R.* iv. 595, above, p. 134, n. 4), why was the strange *disignum* 'translation' invented? The word *χάρακτος* would have been understood in Rabbinic parlance (cf. *LW* ii. 291, s.v. *CHLAKTORIN*). See also S. Lieberman, *Greek and Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (Hebrew edn., Jerusalem, 1962), 32–5, etc. It is possible to argue these points to and fro, but for the moment the questions must remain unresolved. On the reading of edicts during this period, see Lieberman in *J.Q.R.* xxxv. 1 (1944), 6–10. It seems quite clear that the Rabbis knew Diocletian's edict of maximum prices, and even referred to it indirectly (see my remarks in *Talpiot*, ix. 3–4 (1970), 597–602, Hebrew).