

A PARTHIAN COIN-LEGEND ON A CHINESE BRONZE

by O. MAENCHEN-HELFEN

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 l 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

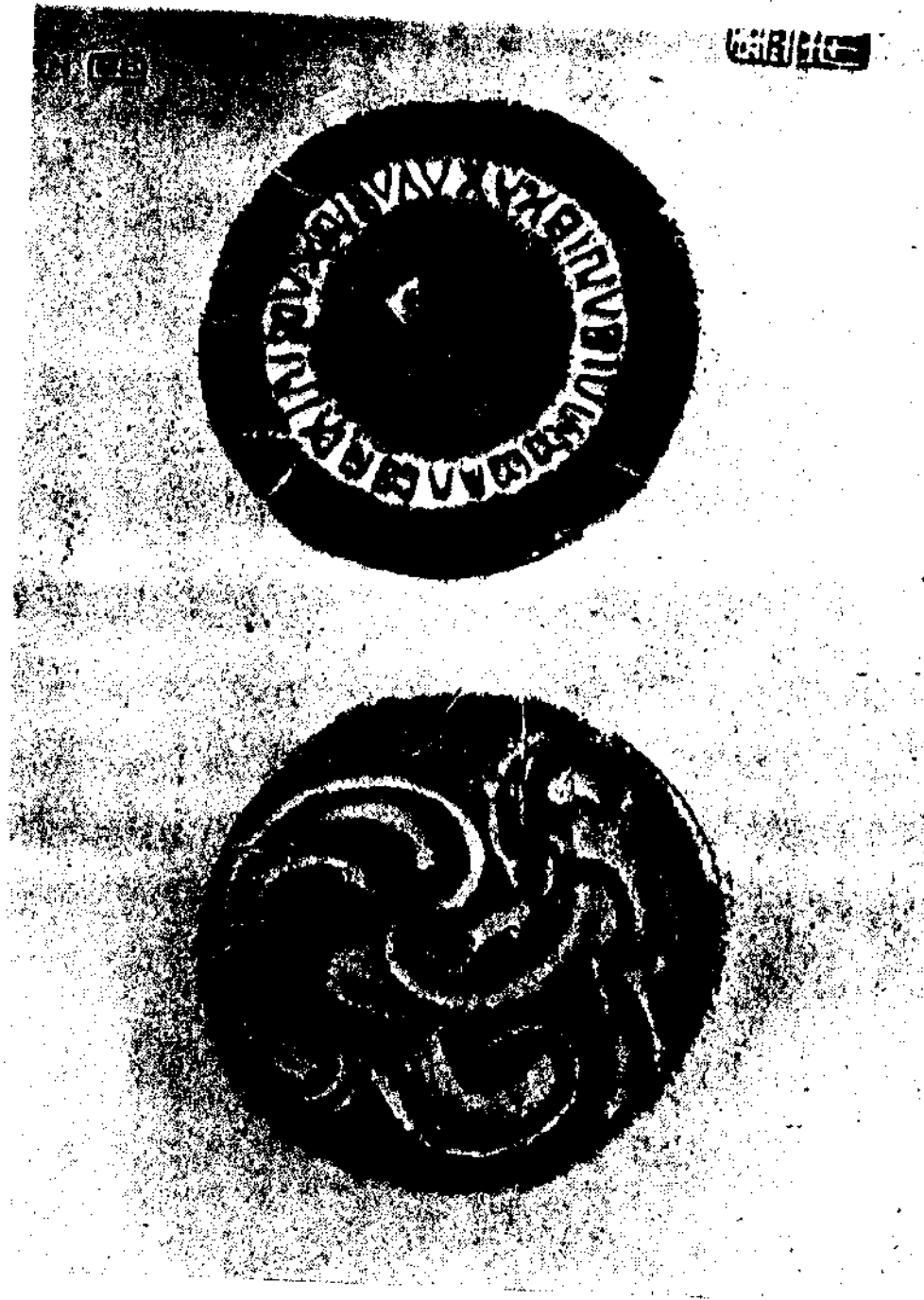


Fig. 2

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. ΠΧΛΙΑΩ
9. ΠΠΓΙΧΑΗΟΥΣ	19. ΠΧΛΩΩ
10. Π ΧΛΙΩ	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). ΟΥΣ has the forms

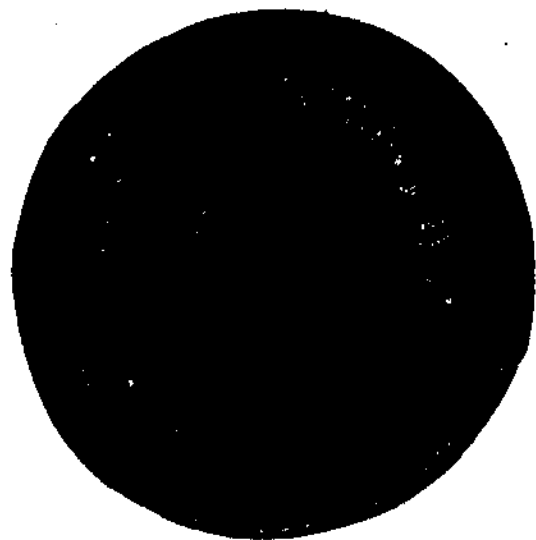
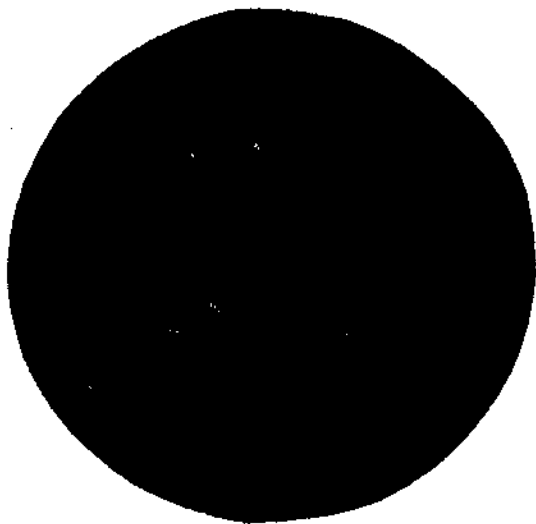


Fig. 4



A Parthian Coin-Legend

Fig. 3

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.