Crowning the Emperor an unorthodox image of Claudius, Agrippa I and Herod of Chalkis

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CROWNING THE EMPEROR
AN UNORTHODOX IMAGE OF CLAUDIUS,
AGRIPPA I AND HEROD OF CHALKIS

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Résumé – L'article porte sur des monnaies de deux rois hérodiens, Agrippa I (AD 37-44) et Hérodé de Chalcis (AD 41-48), qui les montrent couronnant de lauriers l’empereur Claude. Le langage iconographique impérial offre une abondance de scènes de couronnement similaires, destinées à la glorification des victoires et des succès de l’empereur. Mais malgré les apparences, familières, la configuration employée ici sur ces monnaies est fort inusitée et originale, utilisant des motifs communs afin de construire une nouvelle image du pouvoir royal. Bien que l’intention de glorifier l’empereur soit transparente, l’originalité de cette composition permet aussi d’interpréter la scène d’une manière moins orthodoxe, en contradiction avec les principes de l’art romain impérial.

Mots clés – Judée, Chalcis, portraits, numismatique, dynastie hérodienne.

Abstract – This article looks at a narrative image on the coins of two Herodian kings, Agrippa I (AD 37-44) and Herod of Chalkis (AD 41-48). It shows the two kings crowning the emperor Claudius with wreaths. The crowning scene seems familiar, even banal, at first sight, a routine allegory to glorify the emperor’s victories and successes. But a closer look reveals that the constellation is in fact highly original, a creative adaptation of common motifs, re-channelled to concoct a new narrative of royal ideology. Whereas the intended message of glorification is fairly transparent, the unorthodox arrangement of figures in this image also has the potential for unintended interpretations that would, from a Roman angle, be considered off-message.

Keywords – Judaea, Chalkis, portraiture, numismatics, Herodian dynasty.

The Herods were late comers on a complex and volatile political scene that emerged from the collapse of the Seleukid empire and the gradual expansion of Roman power. The Near East at the time was a...
mosaic of territories where, outside the most Hellenised cities annexed by Rome, tribes, dynasts, high priests, warlords and city tyrants vied for power. The most influential among them were “client kings”, often approved or even appointed and sustained by Rome, who in return were expected to provide irregular “gifts” to the emperor and contribute troops to the Roman army. These dynasts have received increasing attention in recent years, but despite much progress in historical and archaeological terms, much remains to be done, in particular in the area of numismatics.

This article examines one coin type that has attracted little comment, or rather two variants of the same type minted by two Herodian kings, Agrippa I (AD 37-44) and Herod of Chalkis (AD 41-48) (fig. 1). The obverse depicts three full-length figures in what appears to be a historical narrative. The two dynasts, both in cuirass, are standing to either side of the togate emperor Claudius (AD 41-54) and holding wreaths over his head. I have previously commented on this image to point out the key features of the portraiture of Herodian (and Nabataean) kings, their costumes, body types and portrait styles. In this study, the focus is on the composition and narrative of this remarkable scene, its origins and significance.

At first this crowning seems like a conventional scene of imperial glorification, visualised through the symbolic gesture of honouring a victorious imperator. It was no doubt meant as a glorification of the emperor and an affirmation of the kings and their imperial connections. But a closer look reveals that the constellation is in fact highly unusual and that it is unlikely that the image was created in consultation with the imperial court. The narrative image gives a voice to two important political actors, Agrippa I and Herod of Chalkis, two kings who are mainly known to us from outside testimonies such as the accounts of Josephus and Tacitus. Through this narrative scene, these Herodian kings provide a sense of how they defined themselves and their power and, even more intriguing, of how they viewed their relationship with the emperor.

Figure 1. Herod Agrippa I (AD 37 to 44). Bronze coin (24 mm, three times enlarged) minted in Caesarea Maritima in AD 42/43. Agrippa and his brother Herod of Chalkis cuirassed standing either side of togate central figure (Claudius) and crowning him, “King Agrippa, Augustus Caesar, king Herod”, date year 8 / Two clasping hands, inscription in two concentric circles “Covenant between king Agrippa and Caesar Augustus and the Senate and the people of Rome, friendship and alliance.” The drawing is a reconstruction based on what can be gleaned from all the specimens (© A. J. M. Kropp).

2. See KROPP 2013a, p. 1-48 for lit. as well as an argument in favour of the useful misnomer “client king”.
3. For Judaea, see now the new edition of HENDIN 2010 and ARIEL & FONTANILLE 2011.
4. KROPP 2013b.
Only seven examples are known of this rare type, all more or less defective. They were issued simultaneously by the brothers Agrippa I (in Caesarea) and Herod of Chalkis (in Chalkis) in AD 42/3. The identification of these two monarchs is assured thanks to the legends accompanying the three figures on the obverse: on the left ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΓΡΙΠΠΙΑ, in the centre ΣΕΒ ΚΑΙΣΑΡ and on the right ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΓΡΙΠΠΑ. The reverse of Herod’s issue has no imagery and instead a four-line legend surrounded by a wreath: ΚΑΙΣΑΡΙ ΣΕΒΑΣΤΟΙ ΕΤΕ Γ (‘To Claudius Caesar Augustus, year 3’). Agrippa’s reverse thus spells out in words the message of the clasped hands, the ratification of a treaty of friendship. The motif of the clasped hands to express concord was probably inspired by Roman coinage, where it was in use since the first century BC: first by the Junia family, then by Caesar, Mark Antony, Lepidus, Augustus and later by the Flavian and Antonine emperors. The technical wording suggests that it is drawn from some official document. It provides a rare insight into an actual foedus (treaty), which stated the terms on which Rome let a friendly king rule.

The obverse image is harder to interpret. Most scholars agree that it echoes the rhetoric of the reverse, and that “the scene should represent part of the ceremony in the Roman Forum at Rome of the treaty making between Claudius and Agrippa (and Herod)”. In other words, the image is meant as a representation of an actual historical event, even though one should note that there are no other sources to record such a crowning scene.

The event itself, a meeting at Rome in AD 41 between the new emperor Claudius and the two kings, was a great success for Agrippa. On this occasion Claudius confirmed the gifts of land given by Caligula, and added Judaea and Samaria, leaving Agrippa I with the largest Jewish kingdom ever, larger even than that of his grandfather Herod the Great (37 to 4 BC). For Claudius too, this matter must have been a top priority, as he concluded this treaty right after his accession. This episode is but one example for how the Herods profited from their proverbially close relations to Rome, their unwavering loyalty, friendship and cooperation. Herod the Great sent eight of his sons to Rome “to become imbued in Roman mores and to form personal connections with individual Romans and the Roman state at large”. The Herods were endowed with Roman citizenship; Agrippa I even received extraordinary honours such as the ornamenta consularia. Raised in Rome since the age of six, he in particular had first-hand experience of the Roman world. His loyalty to Rome was rewarded with unprecedented honours, none more so than the Knobbed Urn.

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5. The coins are in London (BM), Paris (Cabinet des Médailles), Jerusalem (Bank of Israel; two in Studium Biblicum Franciscanum), Tel Aviv (two in Kadman Museum), and one private collection. RPC 1.4777 and 4982; BURNETT 1987, p. 31-35; MESHORER 2001, nos. 124, 361; HENDIN 2010, nos. 1248, 1251; KUSHNIR-STEIN 2007, p. 57-58 (Agrippa); BURNETT 2007, p. 295-96 (Agrippa). KRAJ 1980, p. 53-56, had not yet recognized Claudius on the obverse. The weight varies between 13.2 and 18.3 g (average 15.6 g); average size is 26 mm.

6. The text is taken from Agrippa’s issue; Herod’s is much abbreviated. The wording comes close to Josephus’ AJ 19.275: ‘He (sc. Claudius) also made a treaty with Agrippa, confirmed by oaths, in the middle of the forum, in the city of Rome (Ὀρμά τε αὐτῷ τεμνέται πρὸς τὸν Ἀγρίππαν ἐπὶ τῆς ἄγορᾶς μέσως ἐν τῇ Ρωμαίων πόλει).’

7. CRAWFORD 1974, index s.v. “Hands, clasped”; RIC I, index s.v. “Clasped hands”.

8. BRAUND 1984, ch. II and passim; contra COŞKUN 2005, p. 3-6 who doubts that foedera were frequently signed or necessary to establish a foreign amicitia.

9. BURNETT 1987, p. 35.

10. AJ 19.274.


knowledge of the inner workings of the empire and experienced the vicissitudes of power, from palace to prison and back again, at the courts of Tiberius, Caligula and Claudius. Together with Antiochos IV of Kommagene (ruled AD 38 to 72), Agrippa spent years as Caligula’s close confidant, and the two kings were thought to exercise such a deep, and pernicious, influence on the young princeps that later authors condemned them as Caligula’s tyrannodidaskaloi (tyrant-teachers). Agrippa I was also rumoured to have played a lead role in the contested accession of Claudius (AD 41). This episode is further discussed below, as it is crucial for the interpretation of the image.

**VARIETY OF CROWNING SCENES**

It is worth spending some time on the significance of the narrative scene with Agrippa, Herod and Claudius. How does the image characterise the depicted persons? What does the constellation of this scene tell us about how the Herodian kings and their circles viewed their relationship to Claudius? The crowning scene on the coin looks familiar, even banal, at first sight. To any inhabitant of the Roman empire, an image of the emperor being crowned with a wreath was an everyday sight, a routine allegory for victory and celebration of the emperor’s successes. This motif is already attested in Hellenistic royal imagery. Hellenistic kings were regularly depicted being crowned by Nikes or personifications of regions and localities representing their domains. Thus Philip V of Macedon was shown being crowned by Hellas, and Alexander himself by Gaia, no less. Mortals, as opposed to allegories, shown in the act of crowning only start appearing in Late Hellenistic times. Even so, in the following centuries the overwhelming majority of examples shows personifications rather than real persons in this role, as for instance Victory crowning Titus in the famous relief panel on the Arch of Titus (fig. 2) or Roma crowning Augustus (fig. 3) on cistophoric tetradrachms minted in Ephesus or Pergamon. Roman imperial media such as coins and state reliefs provide many more examples.

The figure being crowned, as Claudius on the coins, is usually singled out as the protagonist. Its importance is often highlighted, e.g. by scaling up its size, by leaving some free space to its sides, by positioning it in the middle of the image, or by the convergence of the lines of sight of other figures. To underline this, the figure holding the wreath above the head of the honoured is often marked as subordinate in rank such as Nike/Victoria. She is visually marginalised, standing beside or behind the protagonist and often of diminutive size. This hierarchy is especially clear on coins of Roman Phoenicia: all Phoenician cities minted local bronzes showing their city Tyches crowned by tiny Nikes, which are elevated on small columns in order to reach the necessary height. Rather than actors in a narrative scene, the Nikes here are almost reduced to being part of the attribute in their hands. Such crowning scenes proclaim, acknowledge and reinforce the ruler’s legitimacy.

If one were to apply this principle to the image of Agrippa I and Herod crowning Claudius one could conclude that the crowning scene shows the Roman emperor firmly in command at the expense of his acolytes, receiving the homage and adulation of reverential “client” kings. Even though these coins were minted by the client kings themselves, and the Roman emperor would hardly take notice, such an ostensive show of modesty would be fully in line with Herodian ideology. The laureate bust of the Roman emperor takes pride of place on the obverse of the largest denominations of almost all of Agrippa’s coin issues, and indeed those of his uncle Philip and his son Agrippa II. Herodian rulers would either not

15. Dio 59.24.1
16. On the origins and significance of wreaths and crowns, see GANSZYNIEC 1922; BLECH 1982; BERGMANN 2010.
18. Struck ca AD 41-42. RIC I 120; RPC 2221.
19. See e.g. BERGMANN 1998, p. 156, n. 929 for Roman Republican coins with crowning scenes.
depict their own portraits at all, or content themselves with second rank, namely on the obverses of smaller coins.

But what should be emphasised more than it has been until now is that this image differs in a fundamental way from the norm: Mortals (as opposed to Victories and other personifications) are rarely depicted crowning the emperor; a scene where these mortals are not part of the imperial household is even more exceptional.

Though some mortals did crown emperors in real life, such scenes rarely made it into the visual media. The Roman triumph is a case in point. The modern mind associates the idea of a Roman triumph with a mental image of an emperor standing in a quadriga and a slave behind him, holding the wreath above the imperator’s head and murmuring words to the effect of “Remember that thou art mortal” — but this is not what Roman artists show us. Among the multitude of images of triumphal processions, the slave is hardly ever depicted: there are at best three instances, of which the best-known is on one of the Boscoreale cups (fig. 4). Instead, the slave is customarily replaced with a Victory figure, as in the relief panel on the Arch of Titus (fig. 2), transforming a historical event into the allegorical scene described above.

It is equally rare to see members of the imperial household crowning an emperor. One well-known relief panel from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias depicts Nero as a youth and his mother Agrippina, both in frontal position (fig. 5). Nero is wearing a muscle cuirass and was originally holding a spear in the right hand. Agrippina is standing to the right, her head turned towards Nero, wearing a long dress and holding a cornucopia in her left hand in the manner of Tyche/Fortuna. The scene is thought to refer to Nero’s accession with Agrippina’s help in AD 54. Her gesture of crowning allows for various interpretations. Bergmann acknowledges its ambiguous message, “eine Aussage, die sowohl eine leichte Über- wie

22. Bergmann 2010, p. 98-108, 252-53, n. 345 makes a compelling case for excluding the Praeneste relief from this list (contra Beard 2007, p. 88-91): what is depicted there is neither Trajan nor a triumph.
Unterordnung der Mutter beinhaltet”. 24 Is Agrippina taking the subordinate role of a Victory, celebrating the young emperor? Or is the image, on the contrary, a not-so-subtle reminder that it was his formidable mother to whom young Nero owed his power?

The only known parallel of members of the Roman imperial court crowning each other is a relief in Warsaw depicting Caracalla being crowned by his mother Julia Domna while he is crowning a trophy flanked by two minute captives. 25 The portrait of Caracalla allows a fairly precise dating, as it is of the “sole emperor” type of AD 212-15. In analogy to the Aphrodisias relief, it is taken by some to express the sharing of power between the emperor and his mother, their joint rulership. The historical

Figure 4. Boscoreale Cup B. c. AD 10-20. A Roman state relief in miniature. Tiberius in a quadriga in a triumphal procession being crowned by a slave. A rare example where the slave is depicted (from S. REINACH, Repertoire de Reliefs Grecques et Romains 1, 1909, p. 95).

25. FLEISCHER 1983, p. 254, 261-62, fig. 3; BERGMANN 1998, p. 153, 156-57, pl. 31.5; KAMPEN 2009, p. 95, fig. 32. I do not include scenes where the figures are marked as divinised and holding divine attributes, e.g. a cameo in Cologne, BERGMANN 1998, p. 151-57, pl. 30.
situations were similar, as both young emperors had just risen to power. Nero’s rival and adoptive brother Britannicus, the son of Claudius, had just been murdered; Caracalla had just assassinated his brother Geta. It therefore makes sense to depict Nero and Caracalla with their powerful mothers by their side. In circumstances of fratricide which had the potential to spark civil strife, these mothers had a decisive role in backing up their son and provide legitimacy. In addition, the emperors’ military costumes and the postures of the female figures in the act of crowning also invokes associations with Victory, i.e. delivering military victory to their imperial sons. In the Warsaw relief this is underlined by the trophy and the bound captives.

If one accepts, as seems likely, that the mother crowning her son is more than a marginalised Victoria-like attribute holder, but rather meant as a partner in political power, there is no reason why this should not apply to the Herodian kings crowning Claudius. But in order to appreciate the whole breadth of possible connotations of this motif, one must first consider yet another common type of crowning scenes where the roles between the two parties are once again weighted differently.

These are images of investiture where the emperor or his surrogate holds the crown above the head of his appointee, a subordinate ruler. Such crowning scenes are relevant here for their obvious similarity to the coin image of Agrippa I and Herod; they employ the same visual types, but the roles of the protagonists are reversed. The figure 6 shows a very rare coin type (only five specimens known) minted in Caesarea in Cappadocia, probably in the reign of Caligula. The reverse commemorates the exploits of Germanicus, the emperor’s father, in AD 18. At the time, Germanicus was Tiberius’ envoy sent to the east to settle affairs with Parthia and other players in the region. He deposed Vonones from the Armenian throne and crowned Zenon, the son of Polemo of Pontos (37-8 BC) as new king. This ceremony took place in Artaxata, the Armenian capital, and Zenon took on the name of Artaxias (AD 18-34). The coin image shows Artaxias and Germanicus in muscle cuirass side by side in frontal position and flanked by inscription labels (fig. 6). Germanicus is standing on the right, his head turned left and holding a spear in the left hand. With the right hand he is crowning Artaxias with a tiara by holding it unrealistically by the loose ends of a diadem tied around it. Artaxias is holding it in place with his right hand.

The figures are not depicted as equals. Germanicus is taller than Artaxias, and the gesture in this case leaves no question about who is in charge. It symbolises the bestowal of power on a client king by the Roman authorities.

The coin image expresses the steep hierarchy between the crowning and the crowned, as well as the complete dependence of a client king on the favour of the emperor. Roman authors aptly describe such kingship as a gift, a donum populi Romani, or more precisely a loan from the emperor which could be withdrawn at any time. The image is a precursor to later series of Roman coins, starting in the second century, where this hierarchy is visually spelt out more explicitly by scaling the figures: on the well-known “Rex Datus” coins minted under Trajan, Antoninus Pius and Lucius Verus that celebrate the accession of Parthian and Armenian contenders, the emperor has literally the upper hand, crowning a subordinate ruler (fig. 7). One usually sees to the left the diminutive king, to the right the tall emperor, either seated on a platform or towering over his appointee and placing the diadem (viz. tiara) on his head.

These images are not just an artistic metaphor or a visual shorthand to express complex political relations. Such coronations took place in reality as part of the diplomatic proceedings at the end of bilateral negotiations. The coronation of the appointee by the Roman emperor would conclude the investiture:

26. VERMEULE 2000, p. 23, however suspects that had Julia Domna seen the relief, it “might have given her fits”.
27. RIC I, no. 59, pl. 15; BMCRE cxlviii, no. 104, pl. 28.1; RPC 3629.
29. Tac. Ann. 2.56.
30. Tac. Ann. 4.5.
31. BRAUND 1984, p. 165-80 and passim.
32. RIC II, p. 239, 262, 266, 271, 291. Further discussion in Kropp (forthc.).
33. Tac. Ann. 2.56; Strabo 12.3.20 (556).
“he [the emperor] put a diadem on his head and appointed him king” is a typical formula one finds in the literary sources. ³⁴ While it is rightly doubted that Hellenistic kings or Roman emperors acceded power through a ritual of coronation in the medieval or modern sense (hence for them, “coronation” should be written in quotation marks), such a ritual was enacted for the accession of client kings, and these coins show an actual part of historical reality. This aspect of Roman diplomacy, the coronation of client kings, its protocol, rationale and significance, still awaits systematic study, esp. from a client king’s perspective. ³⁵

³⁴. AJ 18.237. See also ref. in RITTER 1965, p. 165-69.
³⁵. BRAUND 1984, p. 27-28, names gifts like the ornamenta consularia, but does not mention the essential insignia, the diadem. RITTER 1965, p. 165-69, merely lists literary sources.
CROWNING AND ROYAL IDEOLOGY

In the coin represented by figure 1 the kings Agrippa I and Herod present themselves with finely crafted composite images. While retaining the Hellenistic diadem and cuirass, they assimilate their physiognomies to Julio-Claudian standards. Like countless individuals across the Greek East of the Roman empire, and especially the local elites, “client kings” adopted elements of Greek and Roman culture without reneging on their own traditions. Each client king created his own identity according to his political and ideological aspirations, blending different cultural traditions in novel ways.

The narrative scene of Agrippa and Herod crowning Claudius goes one step further. It does not merely select and employ elements coming from outside models, but re-interprets their meaning in a creative way. The artists working at the Herodian royal courts took a common visual motif (the emperor being crowned) and reinterpreted it to their masters’ advantage, thereby creating a unique image (the emperor being crowned by two foreign kings!) that has no parallel in Roman coinage. The very fact that the Herods had enough scope to create and divulge such an image deserves further comment.

Beside the fascinating glimpse into client kings’ views of Roman relations, coins with such an “un-Roman” iconography demonstrate the great freedom with which client kings could operate in their domestic affairs without apparent interference from imperial authorities. Recent research on the Herodian legacy, approaching the subject from both historical and archaeological angles, has made exactly this point. It is no longer plausible to regard e.g. the strikingly Roman bent of the construction projects of Herod the Great as the result of an alleged “cultural surveillance” from Roman governors or emperors (down to details such as wall-paintings at Masada). Or to assume that Herod was entrusted with a mission to Romanise Palestine through cultural assimilation and thus prepare it for annexation. First, it has been shown that annexation was not a long-term strategy of Rome. The engagement of Roman authorities in the area was often piecemeal and inconsistent, lacking an overarching, long-term strategic policy. Thus there can be no sense of local dynasts paving the way for Rome to take over. Secondly, it seems very unlikely that Herod’s interior decoration, or most other matters relating to his building programme should have served the primary aim of proclaiming his loyalty to the Roman cause, e.g. through Roman baths and Second Style paintings; besides, many of his projects, like his many recreational palaces, were in remote locations that would have been invisible to Roman authorities or the distant emperor in Rome. This is of course not to deny the manifest Romanophilia of Herod and many of his royal colleagues. Latching on to Roman culture often proved a prudent choice that yielded great political benefits. But there was no universal imposition from above. Beyond Palestine, the sheer diversity of responses, from one client king to the next, to the impact of Roman power makes it unlikely for such romanizing directives to have existed. The spectrum reaches from the zealous loyalty of Herod at one end to his next-door neighbours, the Nabataean kings, at the other end, who expressed their cultural indifference to Rome by omitting any reference to it in their coins, inscriptions and material remains.

In brief, there is no evidence that client kings were expected to romanize themselves, their subjects or the material culture of their kingdoms, and the idea of “cultural surveillance” simply overestimates Roman interest in such matters.

The image discussed here is a good illustration of the relative independence enjoyed by two client kings in their internal matters. They developed and broadcasted their own images, even in intensely public media like coinage. Though it is often assumed that the right to strike coins, and silver in

38. Paltiel 1991, p. 311: ‘In much modern writing client statehood is dismissed as a transitional stage on the road to imperial rule… However, the zigzaggy process, the veers and turns of Roman policy cast serious doubt on the general rule.’ See also ibid., p. 202-3.
39. E.g. in portraiture, urban planning, ritual, see Kropp 2013a passim.
particular, was a special privilege granted by the Roman authorities, there is no evidence for this. Of course, on the coins themselves Roman elements are visible and often glaringly obvious. As mentioned above, coins of Herodian kings routinely bear the busts of emperors on their obverses. Agrippa even copied Roman imperial dies, such as a famous Roman sestertius type with Caligula on the obverse and the emperor’s three sisters Julia, Drusilla and Agrippina holding cornucopiae in the manner of Fortuna on the reverse. Other issues co-commemorate Caligula’s father Germanicus, depicted in a triumphal quadriga. Such a blatant exhibit of like-mindedness with Rome is no empty rhetoric. In order to make his own case, Agrippa flaunted his loyalty and his connections to Caligula, and later to Claudius. However, he played this game on his own terms, as part of a calculated effort that suited his agenda, not because he was coerced to do it. The addressee was not necessarily Rome, the emperor or Roman authorities. To assure them of his loyalty, Agrippa had other, more direct ways at his disposal such as the imperial cult. Primarily these messages were directed towards the people who would handle the coins on a daily basis, Agrippa’s own subjects. Some of them will have wholeheartedly agreed with a Rome-friendly course and welcomed their ruler’s close ties and friendship; others may not. Those who took a dim view of such a display of Romanophilia in Agrippa’s media would have seen this as confirmation that their king was little more than a pawn on a Roman chessboard; but they would at least get the clear message that the king was backed by the mighty empire and that his rule was unassailable. Beside their imperial connections, client kings also broadcasted themes of domestic and dynastic power, or they advertised the prosperity of the country thanks to the king’s efforts.

In light of this assessment of the relative liberty of kings to pursue their own means of self-advertising, it is worth expanding on the interpretation of this coin type. The intended message of the crowning scene is manifestly one of ostensive loyalty. To a viewer familiar with Roman iconography, the crowning scene on the Herodian coins would at first sight appear unexceptional, a standard tool to glorify the emperor by visual means. It fits many other Herodian coin obverses which showed the emperor’s bust, and it fits with Herodian politics on a much larger scale, as expressed in the dedication of buildings and even entire cities to members of the imperial household. But because of the unorthodox arrangement of figures, whereby the kings are shown crowning the emperor, this unusual coin type can open the door to unintended interpretations. Therefore it is worth considering how this coin image would have been interpreted by its audience. The variety of the different crowning scenes illustrated here (kings crowning emperor; Nike crowning emperor; mother crowning emperor son; emperor crowning king) suggests that there will be no global explanation that explains the motif as such. Rather than establishing an absolute or intrinsic meaning one needs to consider context (location, audience, historical circumstances) as well as the size, identity and constellation of the figures depicted.

The uniqueness of the constellation of figures on the coins makes the interpretation much less straightforward than originally thought. Any viewer familiar with Roman imperial iconography would have been surprised to realise that the two “Victories” on the coins are in fact men of flesh and blood, and two foreign kings at that. A well-versed viewer might be led to think of other crowning scenes involving client kings, namely scenes of coronation. But whereas the coin commemorating Germanicus shows the familiar Roman perspective, the emperor or in this case his surrogate wielding supreme power and crowning a client king (fig. 6), the Herodian image shows the reverse, the emperor being crowned by two client kings. One can easily realise how out of tune, from a Roman perspective, the Herodian image is if one tries to imagine how Roman artists would have dealt with the same subject, the ratification of a treaty of friendship and the confirmation of a client king. Roman coins would show the exact reverse. Like on Germanicus’ coin, it would be Claudius crowning the Herodian kings, not the other way round.

40. E.g. SCHÜRER, History I, 317 n. 107; RPC 1, p. 7-8; BERNETT 2007, p. 229.
41. CRAWFORD 1985, p. 268-69; BUTCHER 1993, p. 293-94. For the Seleukid empire, however 1 Macc. 15.6 explicitly records the privilege to strike coins, which Simon Maccabee received from Antiochos VII.
42. MESSHORE 2001, no. 112; BURNETT 1987, p. 27-28; HENDIN 2010, no. 1236.
The coins of Agrippa and Herod thus seem like a flagrant departure from how Roman state art renders historical events. Furthermore, it is one thing to have Nero being crowned by Agrippina, as discussed above, but having Claudius crowned by two non-imperial outsiders is a different matter altogether. Let alone by two foreign kings!

The timing of these issues is important. The coins showing Germanicus and Artaxias are dated roughly to within a few years of the coins of Agrippa and Herod, and there were no doubt more images of coronations of Roman client kings in circulation at the time. Remarkably, the same Germanicus is also commemorated on coins of Agrippa I (see above). Agrippa was no doubt aware of Germanicus’ exploits in the region and of his appointment of client rulers such as Artaxias of Armenia. More importantly, Agrippa was intimately familiar with the Roman custom of crowning subordinate rulers and the symbolism of subservience to the emperor it entailed. Just a few years earlier, Agrippa had undergone the same ceremonial investiture: in AD 37, Caligula “put a diadem on his [sc. Agrippa’s] head and appointed him king of the tetrarchy of Philip”!

It is of course out of the question that Agrippa or Herod (viz. their courts and die-cutters) intended to mimic the investiture of a Roman client king by putting themselves as the crowning party. Crowning a client king with a diadem and crowning an emperor with a laurel wreath are two fundamentally different things. The former is a royal coronation, part of a ceremony of investiture that transforms the status of the crowned person and elevates him to monarchy. The latter is mainly a symbolic gesture that conveys honour, but leaves the emperor’s status untouched. However, a viewer could be forgiven for connecting these two kinds of scenes that employ the same types, gestures and protagonists. It is probably due to the potential for contradiction that images of mortals crowning emperors are so excessively rare.

An ancient viewer familiar with current politics could be led even further down this road of unintended meaning. Reports and rumours about the circumstances of Claudius’ accession would make the visual image of Agrippa and Herod crowning the emperor seem particularly risqué. According to our sources, after the assassination of Caligula (AD 41) the praetorian guard found Claudius in the palace and acclaimed him emperor on their own initiative. Dio and Josephus agree that Agrippa was an eye-witness to the events and then played an important role in negotiating with the Senate and persuade it to accept the new emperor. This partly explains Claudius’ subsequent ostensive generosity towards Agrippa. Having “delivered a panegyric on the king” Claudius repaid the favour and proceeded to confirm and enhance the power of Agrippa, almost as his first act in office. Claudius’ questionable route to imperial power were his weakness. And to the eyes of many, Claudius’ subsequent actions seemed to reveal a fatal character flaw. Claudius suffered from a reputation as a “weakling” commandeered by powerful women and freedmen at court: “Claudius fell so deeply under the influence of these freedmen and wives that he seemed to be their servant rather than their emperor.” The last thing Claudius could have wanted to see was images that seemed to insinuate, however obliquely, that his power depended on foreign kings. The people handling the coins of Agrippa and Herod would recognize Claudius and the kings and connect this visual narrative to rumours of Agrippa’s role in Claudius’ accession, a story that everyone must have been aware of. The Herodian coin image could be taken to suggest that Claudius owed his laurel wreath, and hence his power, to Agrippa and Herod, just like Artaxias owed it to Germanicus, or later on Nero to Agrippina. Again, it should be emphasised that this is a far cry

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44. AJ 18.237.
45. BJ 2.206-17; also Dio 60.8.2. The version in AJ 19.236-77 is more detailed and laudatory towards Agrippa, crediting him with overcoming a hostile Senate bent on staging a coup d’état. SCHWARTZ 1990, p. 90-93.
46. AJ 19.274.
47. Claudius pursued this policy only in his first few months before initiating a series of annexations of client kingdoms, PALTEL 1991, p. 227-40, 309, 313.
49. Considering that the embellished version of the events came from a Jewish source, SCHWARTZ 1990, p. 23-30, 91, it is entirely possible that it was this version that circulated in Judaea.
from the intended purpose of the coin image to celebrate Claudius, Agrippa and Herod and to advertise their mutual loyalty and friendship. But it is also clear that the crowning scene could lead the viewer to conclude, perhaps supplemented by rumours from Rome, that Agrippa had not only signed a treaty and forged a bond of friendship with the emperor but also played a vital role as Claudius’ kingmaker. It seems hard to imagine that such an insidious image could have circulated in Rome. Agrippa and Herod honed their message to their own local populations for whom the coins were legal currency, and to this purpose the image was finely attuned. Whereas many Herodian coins make explicit reference or even copy official imperial imagery, this coin type demonstrates that these client kings did not design their official imagery with the primary aim of pleasing the emperor. They had the liberty to deviate and devise their own visual programmes with unorthodox iconographies.

The coin image provides a fascinating insight. What it does is to turn the telescope the other way round. To art historians and archaeologists used to handling Roman imperial imagery of glorification of the emperor, here is a unique view from the other side, a narrative of how two client kings wanted to be seen by their own subjects, how they wanted them to perceive their relationship towards Rome, and how they wanted them to look at the emperor. It is one all-too-rare example of a visual narrative of client king ideology.

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